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The Sinfulness of Sin

Introduction

Good morning, Union Church. My name is Kyle Rodriguez, I'm one of the pastors here.

This morning we are going to continue working our way through the book of Romans, finishing the first chapter. Then, over the next three weeks, we'll work our way through chapter 2.

And it's worth noting, before we dive in, that this section of Romans feels bleak. It's weighty. It's serious. Because this part of Romans—essentially starting with this week's passage all the way through at least part of chapter 3—is establishing the depth and darkness of the dominion of sin. It is establishing the bleak state of every person in existence, perhaps best summed up by Romans 3:10-12.

“None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ no one understands;
no one seeks for God.

¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”

So, it's going to be a fun few weeks. Now, here's the thing: it might not be a “fun” few weeks. It might be a painful few weeks. But it is a thousand percent necessary! I know that some of you are groaning internally. “It's going to be one of *those* months. I'm going to feel like I'm back at my grandparents fire-and-brimstone churches.”

But we need this. We need it.

We live in a world of excessive superficiality. We live in a world where the primary aim of life is to be comfortable. And it is uncomfortable to talk about weighty topics. It's uncomfortable to talk about death—that's why we don't put our cemeteries next to churches anymore. It's uncomfortable to deal with getting older—that's why we put our elderly in nursing homes.

But a life of mere comfort is fake! It's not real! It's superficial. It's flimsy. It doesn't deal with the realities of life. It can't answer the question: Well, what do I do when my mom gets dementia and she can't remember me any more and I have to watch her mind slip into nothingness? How do I reckon with that reality? If all we ever do is talk about the comfortable parts of life, we will be light, flimsy people.

One of the things that I love about the Bible it does not shy away from the messy, weighty parts of life. And so, one of the things I love about preaching through a book of the Bible like this is it forces us out of our comfort zone. We can't just skip over this text because it's uncomfortable. We have to let the Word of God shape us to make us weighty people.

And the glory of being a Christian—and the glory of the Bible—is that the gospel of Jesus Christ makes us a profoundly sober people (we can see the truth of the biggest, hardest questions in the world) but also a profoundly hopeful people (there is an answer to those questions, a solution to those problems).

The point of this text is grounded in what we read two weeks ago. Two weeks ago, we read verses 16-17, where Paul gives his thesis statement for the whole book, saying that **the Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew and the Greek**. Paul has good news to share!

But the question is: Why do we need it? Why do we need to be “saved” by the power of God?

You can’t understand the goodness of the good news unless you really understand, grapple with, the badness of the bad news. We can’t understand the urgency with which Paul offers the antidote if you don’t have a right diagnosis.

So, this morning, we want to let the Bible give us a right diagnosis of life. What really is the fundamental problem in the world? What is at the root of every evil, of every suffering, of every disordered love, and every split family?

Before we get into it, let’s pray together.

Prayer of Illumination

Main Point

The first half of verse 18 establishes what the primary point of this text and this sermon is: **“¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.”**

This is the fundamental problem of the universe. You have no greater problem in the world than this. Whatever issue is on your mind right now, whatever anxiety is tickling the back of your skull, it pales in comparison to the issue at hand here—and, as we’re going to see, it’s the root of those problems. And this is the problem: Because of our own natures, our own inclinations, and our own actions, we have put ourselves in the way of God’s wrath. Oh, we love the promise: “If God is for you, who can be against you?” but the inverse is the most terrifying reality in all the universe: “If God is against you, who can be for you?”

And it’s important to note from the outset, Paul wants to show that this problem is ultimately the problem of everybody. It’s true of Jew and Greek. Old and young. Black and white. Male and female. The gospel is good news for everybody, can be applied to everybody, because everybody ultimately has the same problem. Every human who has ever existed—save one—exists in a state of unrighteousness and ungodliness and is standing paralyzed on train tracks, with the wrath of God barreling toward us.

Now, because Paul wants to show that every person must deal with this problem, he’s going to try and show it through looking at particular people groups. This passage we’re dealing with today is particularly aimed at Gentile peoples and nations, for example, and in future weeks we’ll see Paul take aim more specifically at Jewish people and Israel.

But the thing is, while Paul has groups of people in mind, the patterns that he talks about are all patterns that happen in the lives of individuals. It’s a pattern I think each of us can see taking place in our own lives, and in our broader culture, regardless of whether we use “Gentile” and “Jewish” identity markers.

So, every bit of what Paul has to say has application for you and how you see the world. If these realities described in the rest of this text aren't things you can see in the world and in yourself, you will not love the gospel. None of it will make sense to you.

So, verse 18 establishes the premise for this whole section: All humans stand in the way of God's wrath because of our ungodliness and unrighteousness.

I. The Sinfulness of Sin

So, the question we have to ask is: "What is the big deal about *unrighteousness* and *ungodliness*? Why is God so upset over it? Why does it deserve 'wrath'—which is a scary word, not a word we're prone to using, it seems like a bit excessive—what is it about us that has God so angry?"

Well, let's continue to read, starting at the end of verse 18:

who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

We suppress the truth. There is something that is fundamentally true about reality, about the world, about ourselves, and we blindly look past it, we shove it down, we ignore it. Well, it must be a big, important truth, for it to garner such a big reaction from God. What is this 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.

The truth we suppress is truth about God! It's the truth of his existence, of his power, of his divine nature. Paul says: the reality of God is woven into the universe. It is stitched into the fabric of every atom, it's displayed every time a caterpillar bursts out of a cocoon as a butterfly, it shows up when an awesome thunderstorm rolls across the sky, we see it in our child's face when they come out of the womb.

And it's not accidental. It's not like the evidence for God's existence is like a footprint that a thief leaves under a windowsill accidentally. The police come and they say: "Aha! We can know something about this thief, he wears men's size 11 shoes with an athletic tread!"

No, God's existence is not seen in creation as some incidental, left-over footprint. It was purposeful.

Look again at what Paul says: "**what can be known about God is plain to them, because *God has shown it to them.***" Paul hints at it again at the end of verse 20: "**his invisible attributes...have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, *in the things that have been made.***"

That things have been made, implies a maker, a maker who made things for a purpose: To make his invisible attributes visible. God made the world so that you would know something about him.

And Paul says, you do know something about him. You just suppress it. Look at what Paul says next:

²¹ For although they knew God (we really do know God, even in a very limited, incomplete way) 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.

In other words, the knowledge of God is meant to lead to something. We're not just meant to know something about God the way a middle-aged dad knows something about World War II ships. Seeing creation and knowing there's a God, knowing he's powerful, he's wise, he's good—those aren't just meant to be interesting facts you can bring up at a party. They're meant to cause a response: Honor and thanksgiving. In other words, worship!

Everything about you, he made for worship. He created you, in his image, gave you eyes to see a sunset and ears to hear the birds or the crashing waves, gave you a nose to smell flowers or a freshly baked pie, feet to feel the tickle of grass in the summer and fingers to place on the side of your child's face as you tell them good night. He gave you a mind so that you could receive all those things and understand them, that they wouldn't be meaningless to you, but would stir up wonder and joy and love and affection—so that you would look at the sunset and know that he is awesome! That you would look at the changing seasons and know that the one who created all these finite things must be infinite. That you would look at the fragility of a child or the fragility of your own body as you age and know: the one who made me must be more than mortal, more than human, they must be divine!

You were made for worship. But every day we go out in the world and we let the glory of the world pass us by without a fleeting thought about its Creator. We receive the gift of life day after day without a whisper of gratitude passing our lips.

To come into the presence of the King and not bow would be disrespectful. To hear the masterpiece of a world-class orchestra and not applaud would be disgraceful. To see the beauty of your spouse and not be moved to affection and love and words of affection is cold and self-centered. How much more disgraceful for us to see the glory of the infinite almighty God in his works and think nothing of him?

And the thing is, Paul doesn't stop there:

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.

This is the key summary of what our great, fundamental sin is. We have exchanged the glory of the immortal God for far lesser things.

It is like we have been at the finest Broadway performance, but we've been glued to Candy Crush on our phones the entire time. And when the curtain goes up and a standing ovation is given, we're just annoyed that all the commotion has interrupted our game. We have missed the sunset for a picture of a mediocre oil painting of a sunset. We have acted cold to a beautiful spouse in order to drool over a grainy video on our phone screen. We have not just missed God, we've actively rejected him, suppressing the truth, and propped other, pale imitations upon his throne.

It's what happened to Adam and Eve, who rejected the commands of their Creator for the commands of a snake, who rejected the joy of communion with God for the taste of an apple. Adam and Eve were God's image-bearers! They were supposed to rule over the beasts, they were supposed to cultivate the fruit of the garden—but instead, they replaced God with lesser things, and they became slaves to them.

It was true for the pagan nations of the world who replaced God with far inferior versions of Gods, statues that just looked like men, gods who looked like birds and stars and cats and lizards.

And it is true for us, who have ignored God and put money, and comfort, and reputation, and ourselves upon the throne. We have spurned the God who created all things that we might know him, enjoy his creation, and

worship him. We have done it collectively, we have done it individually. “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

II. The Corruption of Sin in the Wrath of God

So, all of us have done this. We have exchanged the glory of God for lesser things—the root and foundation of all sin.

But how does God respond to sin? That’s really at the heart of the problem, right? If God didn’t care about this ugly exchange, then our unrighteousness would not be some problem we needed saving from. But the beginning of this passage read that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.” So, what Paul is saying is not that all who sin in the here and now are one day far into the future experience the wrath of God. He’s saying we can see the wrath of God, his immediate reaction to sin, in life right now.

Certainly, his wrath will fully and finally be experienced only at the end, but even before that comes, there is a foretaste that can be experienced.

And his example of that is pretty surprising. Let’s keep reading, in verse 24, the whole second half of our passage this morning that describes God’s reaction to the sin of humanity. As I read these verses, listen for the phrase, “God gave them up.”

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.

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.

“God gave them up.”

He gives them up, in the lusts of their hearts, to impurity and dishonoring of their bodies. He gives them up to dishonorable passions. He gives them up to a debased mind.

In the end, God’s wrath is very simple: It is giving sinful, corrupted people exactly what they want.

Of course, most of us hear “the wrath of God”, we think about the future. We think about judgment day. We think about God pouring out his wrath upon people in hell. We think about fire and brimstone. And often, the

Bible, when it talks about “the wrath of God” is looking forward to “the day of the wrath of the Lord” (Zephaniah 1:18), when the Lord will fully and finally judge the earth.

But what Paul is saying here in this passage is that while the Lord’s wrath has a full and final outpouring in the future, humanity is receiving a foretaste of it here and now. If we’re standing on the train tracks, with a train of God’s wrath coming down the pike, then the foretaste we get here and now is the train’s whistle, blaring. It’s the trembling of the tracks beneath our feet. The train isn’t here yet, but it’s being seen and heard and felt nonetheless.

And what are those warnings? God giving us up to what our sinful flesh most in all the world.

And Paul starts with the example of sex, and sexual desire.

SIDE NOTE: We could do a whole sermon, or series on the topic of sex & sin (and I promise, we have more significant time lined up to directly talk about it)—but that’s not the main point of this message. But I do have to take a moment and say: This passage is one of the clearest repudiations of any Christian who would be tempted to embrace a progressive or worldly sexual ethic, to embrace homosexuality as a valid option for the Christian life.

Look at how Paul talks here! Paul addresses men, he addresses women. He doesn’t use the words used to describe sexual abuse or sex with children. The language he uses in Greek are the words that Jewish commentators and Roman commentators alike used to describe any and all homosexual behavior. He’s not talking about a specific kind of homosexual behavior. He’s addressing homosexuality as a whole, in any and every expression.

And you have to see Paul’s logic here. He’s not describing and denouncing homosexuality because it is a uniquely awful sin, or saying that anybody who has felt same-sex attraction is a unique recipient of the wrath of God. He’s using it as an example of what the root sin of idolatry does as it works itself out from our hearts to our bodies.

Look at what Paul says in verse 26: “God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women *exchanged* natural relations for those that are contrary to nature.” And verse 27: “the men likewise *gave up* natural relations and were consumed with passion for one another.”

What is the fundamental sin of humanity again? That we have exchanged God for something lesser. That’s idolatry. We take what God has given us for his glory—our minds and hearts and bodies and awareness of the world—and utilize it for a different purpose: to worship something else.

What happens in homosexuality? We exchange a good gift of God for something lesser. We take what God has given us that is meant to be used in the context of marriage to have children to fill the earth with the image of God, something that is meant to be a beautiful image of Christ and the Church, and we use it for a different purpose.

In idolatry, we replace the Creator, who is totally different than us, with a creature like us. In homosexuality, we replace a partner who is physically unlike us with one who is like us.

Now, homosexuality isn’t unique in this. Every sin is doing this. It’s all taking something that God gave us for a purpose and exchanging it for some lesser, more base, more degrading, more selfish purpose. That’s what sin is. Paul isn’t highlighting homosexuality because it’s the root of all evil. But it is a particularly vivid example, especially in how it runs against its created purpose—I mean, we have

physical bodies that clearly are designed for these purposes—it is a clear, explicit picture of what is happening in our hearts and minds every time we sin.

You get a hint of that in the next section, when Paul says that God “gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.” It’s the same thing: God gave them a mind in order to acknowledge him, to see the world and perceive who he was, a mind to work out how to live holy lives as his image-bearers. But instead, we use our minds for all kinds of evil. And in case you were getting on your high horse because you don’t struggle with same-sex attraction, you fit in this list somewhere, I know I do. And it’s culminated at the end with this line: “Though they know—in their mind—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.”

It’s not as if we just sin against our will. We approve of it. It comes from the lusts of our hearts and the debasement of our minds. It is as Jesus put it in John 3: “the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.”

We have replaced God and the purposes of God with ourselves, things like us, and our own purposes. It is the great, evil exchange worked out in our life again and again and again.

And so, every one of us, exists in the realm of God’s wrath. He has given us what we wanted. And some day, if we face the fullness of his wrath in hell, we will have exactly what we wanted—separation, independence from God in all its fullness, corruption from sin in all its fullness, in a word: eternal death.

Conclusion

So, this is our state. We all are guilty, and what is more, we are so corrupt that there is no way to absolve our guilt. There is no escape from the wrath of God in and of ourselves.

This is why, Paul says back in verse 16-17, that we need the power of God, the righteousness of God, that comes to us in the gospel. The only hope we have for ourselves is that God intervenes. That he makes things right by paying our guilt and fixing our corruption.

This is what the gospel is for: Not for behavior modification. Don’t you see that even if we were able to stop disobeying our parents, able to stop murdering, able to stop being envious, stop gossiping—even if we were able to stop living out the sexual temptations we are prone to—the root issue still remains! Ultimately it doesn’t matter which of the symptoms you have, what matters is that each of us suffer from the same disease. And the gospel is meant to cure the disease.

The point of the gospel isn’t to make well-behaved people. It’s to make people who have new hearts, who fulfill their ultimate purpose in the world to love God, give him honor and thanks in all they do, and reflect him to the world.

Now, for some people, they will have heard all of this and think: “Well, honestly, all of this sounds pretty self-centered of God. It sounds pretty petty, doesn’t it, that God would be so obsessed with getting honor and thanks that he would be “wrathful” against anybody who doesn’t do so. And he’s only going to “fix” us in order that he might get the glory that he wants. That doesn’t sound like the God who “is love” to me.” It doesn’t sound like a God who wants to be in relationship with me. It sounds like God wants robotic “thanks-givers”.

Oh, how misguided this is. Look, God does want honor. He does want thanks. He is, as the Bible says over and over again: “jealous” for his glory to be seen. He is all about his glory, his exaltation. But that’s not disconnected from relationship and love.

Look, I’m trying to teach my son, Judah, how to say thank you right now, especially with his grandparents, who spoil him rotten.

I’m not trying to teach him to say thank you just so he has the right etiquette. I’m not trying to form a child who begrudgingly says the words, or a robot who just instinctively says it without thinking.

I’m trying to get my son to say thank you because I’m trying to form him into somebody who is genuinely thankful. I’m trying to get him to make the connection between receiving a gift and relationship. I’m trying to get him to connect the gift with the giver and the relationship of joy and honor and love that exists between them.

To be genuinely grateful to someone means two things: (1) It means that you genuinely enjoyed the gift. You can’t have real gratitude without joy. (2) It means that you know and appreciate the giver! It means that you’ve connected the thing to a relationship. You’re grateful for someone who has loved you! Real gratitude is formed by the twin sources of joy and love.

Go back to my son. Every night, I ask Judah: Do you know who loves you? And he is supposed to say: “Jesus.” Sometimes he adds: “And Mommy, and Daddy, and Nora, and Camper?”—Camper is our dog. But, over the last several weeks, every night, I’ve been asking him: “Do you know who loves you?” And he has responded—every night—with “Jesus... and Drake.”

Because three weeks ago, Drake Rider, our pastoral resident came over to help me move some furniture, and before he got to the house, he stopped at Gus’s and bought a bag of breadsticks. He knew that our family loved breadsticks, he knew Judah loves breadsticks. And he got to our house, and Judah saw that he had a bag of something, and he said: “What’s that?” and Drake said, “They’re for you!” And I said, “Woah, Drake must love you a lot! Say thank you!” And now, Judah knows, Drake loves him.

God’s desire for worship and honor and thanks is not mere egomania. It’s meant to be genuine reaction after being filled with real joy, experienced in the context of relationship. And to prove it, God did not let us stay in our state of wrath.

But because God, while hating sin, loved his sinful people, he planned from before time began to save them from their sin and deserved death.

He sent his Son, to come and live a life on behalf of his people, enjoying his creation perfectly and giving him the honor and thanks in every area of life as was intended. And then he died a death on behalf of his people, enduring not merely a foretaste of the Father’s wrath for sin, but its full and final measure. Though he was innocent, he stepped in front of the train of wrath that is barreling toward us, that our guilt would be paid for. And then he rose to new life, purchasing by his death and resurrection the Spirit of new life to send to his people, that not only would our guilt be paid for, but that we would no longer be filled with evil, but with the Spirit. That our minds would be renewed, we would be given a new heart, that by Spirit-indwelled bodies we could begin to reverse the curse of sin that has clung so closely.

And it’s meant to lead to worship. It’s meant to create a feeling of honor and thankfulness in you that is genuine—that you can look at the good gifts that he’s given you (in the birds of the air and the food on your

plate and the people that you love, but ultimately, in the gospel of Jesus Christ) and say: wow, he must love me a lot. What a good God I have!

So, this morning, here's the opportunity each of us have. Whether you'd call yourself a Christian today or not, all of us have exchanged the glory of God for created things, and we deserve wrath and death. But Christ has paid for something different. He has made a way for you to escape that wrath and step into a life that you were created for, to exchange the lesser things for the indescribable glory of relationship with God almighty—a relationship that is defined by receiving the good gifts of God, being filled with an inexpressible joy, and giving thanks to him.

Jesus himself said it best in John 3:36 – “³⁵The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand. ³⁶Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

Brother and sister, the wrath of God doesn't have to stay on you. Believe in Christ, treasure him above all else, and listen to him. He is calling you off the tracks and into life itself!