THE ROOT OF SIN

Romans 1:18–32

Key Verse: 1:21

“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.”

Have you ever stopped to wonder, “What’s causing this?” Maybe you felt sick, or you were having problems in a relationship, or it just seemed the world is getting worse and worse. In today’s passage Paul takes a look at the world and all its problems and has a clear picture of what’s gone wrong. The real problem, Paul says, is that people are ignoring God. In our country we’re free to worship God, and free even to ignore him. But this passage shows us that there are devastating consequences when we try to leave God out. We especially want to think about what it means to “honor God as God,” and how we can live this way, even when everyone around us is racing in the opposite direction. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living word today.

In 1:18–32 Paul begins a systematic presentation of the gospel, the good news. But first he describes the bad news. Read verse 18. The word “For” connects verse 18 with verse 17. He’s just said that “the righteousness of God is revealed” in the gospel. But he adds, “For the wrath of God is [also] revealed” or “exposed.” God’s wrath is his anger toward sin. God’s anger is different from ours, which is self-centered, vengeful and way out of proportion. The Bible often says that God is “slow to anger” (Ex34:6; Nu14:18; Ne9:17; Ps86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Joel2:13; Jon4:2; Na1:3). But it doesn’t mean he never gets angry at all. God’s wrath is part of his righteousness. Wrath is his just response to evil. But it’s not like impersonal “karma.” Because God loves us so much, he gets angry when we do wrong. If he were indifferent to the way we treat him or others, it would mean he didn’t care. So his wrath is “the other side of the coin” of his great love.

Paul says God’s wrath is revealed “from heaven.” What does he mean? “Heaven” is the place from which God rules the universe. It’s where he has the best view to see everything and everyone and still be “above it all.” Verse 20 mentions that one of God’s qualities is that he’s “invisible.” Many people misunderstand this and think God isn’t there at all, so they can get away with anything. But though he’s invisible, God really *is* there, in sovereign control of everything, seeing and watching everything and everybody, even the most overlooked and abused people (Ge16:13). From heaven he sees not only all that we do, but also our thoughts, our hearts, even our secrets (2:16; cf. Ps139:1,2; 44:21). No one can hide; we’re all accountable to him (14:12; Heb4:13).

So when God looks from heaven on the earth, what does he see? Verse 18 says “all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” People may not see the world this way, but to God, who’s so pure and holy, it’s all stinking to high heaven. Paul’s going to describe it later on in this passage. But here he says it incites God’s wrath because it’s not how God made us to be. God made us all in his image to be holy and righteous like him. But when he looks at us, what he sees is all kinds of ungodliness and unrighteousness. Ungodliness means lacking proper reverence for God. Unrighteousness means treating others badly, in too many ways. And it’s our ungodliness that produces our unrighteousness.

Paul goes on to say in verse 18 that by our unrighteousness we “suppress the truth.” What does he mean? Simply speaking, when our daily life is full of ungodliness and unrighteousness, it’s like we’re putting a smoke screen of all kinds of bad attitudes and behavior out there, making it seem like there’s no truth, or, like we’re squishing the truth into a box and sitting on top of it in order to hide it. We may be suppressing the truth and not even realize it.

But what is this “truth” that’s being suppressed? It’s not just some personal information or scientific knowledge we’re trying to hide. Read verses 19,20. The truth we suppress is the truth we know about God. Just by reflecting on nature, on how things are made, we know that there’s a Creator. It’s not obscure or hard to see. God has “shown it” to us “plainly.” It’s as obvious as when we look at a piece of art and know that some amazing artist painted it, or at an intricate watch and know that a watchmaker carefully crafted it. Creation doesn’t reveal everything about God there is to know, but plenty enough to show us that he’s very real. It says “his eternal power and divine nature.” God’s eternal power can be seen in the mighty winds, the flooding rains, the crashing ocean waves, or in the majestic mountains and tall forests. His divine nature is seen in the beauty of all his vast creation, like a stunning sunset, or the spectacular moon and stars, or the sunshine on a sparkling river. His divine nature can also be seen in his goodness to always provide for all living things to enjoy life and breath and everything else (Mt5:45; Ac14:17; 17:25,28; cf. Ps65:9–13; 104:10–14). Paul says in verse 20 that this truth about God has been “clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world.” People have been seeing God’s glory and divine nature, all over the world, for a very long time, from the beginning (Ps19:1–4).

Paul’s conclusion in verse 20b is, “So they are without excuse.” In Greek it literally says “they are inexcusable” or “undefendable.” Why does Paul add this? It’s because people pretend like they didn’t know! We human beings are geniuses in making excuses for our bad behavior. We blame our ignorance on others, our situation, or the rest of the world. We all know that God is there, yet still we try to suppress this truth by acting like he doesn’t exist. It’s like covering our eyes and shouting, “There’s no sky!” There’s really no good excuse for this.

What should we be doing with the truth we plainly know about God? Read verse 21. Paul says we all should be honoring God as God and giving thanks to him. It should be as natural to us as breathing. Paul writes in 11:36, “For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.” Since God has given us life and breath and all the good things in our lives we enjoy each day, we should honor him as God and give thanks to him. We should be giving our hearts and minds to reflect on how awesome God really is. Sadly, so often we have to be forced to do it, almost like an afterthought. Sometimes we think of God like a genie in a bottle, someone we should try to manipulate to get what we want. But honoring God as God means showing him the respect he deserves, even if we’re *not* getting what we want.

In the Bible Daniel was a teenager when he was taken with his three friends as exiles to Babylon. Even though these boys were surrounded by an idolatrous culture, they refused to compromise their faith in God. Soon Daniel’s three friends were threatened with being sent to a fiery furnace to be burned alive if they didn’t worship a golden image. They told the king they believed God was able to deliver them from that furnace, but even if he *didn’t*, they still refused to worship the image (Da3:17,18). This was how they honored God as God.

Job is another good example. He had seven sons, three daughters, and all kinds of cattle, flocks and servants. One day sudden tragedy came upon him. His cattle, flocks, servants, children and house were all gone. But Job said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job1:1–22). He honored God as God. Unlike Job, our thanks to God can be so conditional. When we’re blessed, we feel good and we *might* remember to thank God. When we suffer, even a bit, we’re quick to start complaining. But as long as we have life and breath we should praise and thank God, “in all circumstances” (1Th5:18).

Our Lord Jesus warned us about trying to honor God with our lips while our hearts are far from him (Mt15:8). He was talking about religious people who keep the rules outwardly and say all the right things but have something else going on inside them. This is where sin starts, in our hearts, in being self-centered, self-glory seeking, and ungrateful to God. We live in a “me-centered” culture. People put “me” first. They think the world revolves around *them*. Everything, they think, is for them: *their* ego, *their* needs, *their* desires. They’re constantly thinking about themselves. It’s exhausting to be around them. What’s worse, they have no room in their hearts for God. Even so-called Christians can become like this.

So how can we really honor and thank God in our daily lives? Paul has a great tip in Colossians 2:6,7: “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.” On our own we’re too sinful to honor God as God and give thanks to him. We need to be rooted and built up in our Lord Jesus Christ, walking by faith in him every day. It means that every day we need to remind ourselves of his grace, every day let his grace make us spiritually alive, and every day, instead of complaining, be about forgiving each other (Col 1:14; 2:13; 3:13). When we do, our hearts will be “abounding in thanksgiving.”

When we don’t honor and thank God, something else happens to us. Verses 21b–22 read, “…but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools…” In Greek the word “futile” means empty or vain. It means we start thinking about how great we are instead of about how great God is. It also means thinking about life and the world but forgetting the truth that God is there. Human beings have the gift of reason and can figure out all kinds of things with it. But if we leave God out, even all our spectacular reasoning comes to nothing. It’s like leaving the most important factor out of a math equation—even with the most complex computations, the answer is still completely wrong. So Psalm 14:1a says, “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Ephesians 4:18 says, “They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart.” Clearly our minds, our understanding, are very much influenced by the condition of our heart. We may think we’re so wise, but if we’re ignoring God, we’re nothing but fools.

Paul goes on to give some examples of our foolishness. Our foolishness causes us to make some really bad exchanges. Read verse 23. Our first foolish exchange is that we switch the living God for dead idols. To Paul, it’s a really dumb switch. In his day there were various gods represented by statues that looked like mortal man or birds or animals or creeping things, or some mixture of them. We don’t take such statues seriously today, but we do have more than enough of our own modern-day idols: money, possessions, relationships, children, our appearance, fun experiences—all kinds of good things can become our idols. An idol is anything or anyone that we give more practical attention to and more value than God himself. In his book *Counterfeit Gods* Tim Keller wrote that an idol is “anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, and anything that you seek to give you what only God can give.”

How does God respond to our foolish exchange? Read verse 24. When we worship idols, God “gives us up” in the lusts of our hearts to impurity. The expression “gave them up” is interesting. It implies that God has been trying hard to keep us close to him. But when we keep choosing idols over God, he lets go. In fact, he gives us a shove and lets us go down a dangerous river. This is a very practical expression of how he reveals his wrath. Later Paul explains that one day there will be a final day of God’s wrath (2:5). But God has been expressing his wrath against human sin all along, in letting sin take its course in people’s lives. Finally, verse 24 tells us that sexual sin begins when people start worshiping some kind of idol in the place of God himself.

In verse 25 Paul describes it more directly: “…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.” It’s a total lie that creatures are better than the Creator or more important in any way than he is. The truth about God our Creator is the best, and we should never, ever exchange that truth for anything or anyone else.

In verses 26,27 Paul describes more about how God “gave them up.” To Paul, homosexuality is another foolish exchange we make, and God lets us do it as another form of his wrath. Originally God made human beings to be male and female, and he gave us sex within marriage as a wonderful gift and blessing to enjoy. Physiologically, it’s obvious what our gender is for. But when sin takes root in our hearts, we don’t want what’s normal and natural. We rebel against God and his creation order by choosing what’s “contrary to nature,” and by allowing our passions to become “dishonorable” and “shameless.” Many people today are wandering with questions about their gender identity and sexual orientation. Some are having surgery. They’re trying so hard to erase any kind of guilt and shame and so desperately want to be accepted as they are. There’s much controversy about this, but the simple answer is to try to see ourselves as God our Creator sees us. And the good news of the gospel is that God can forgive, help and restore anyone to be his most precious child, by faith in Jesus.

Read verse 28. This is the third time Paul says “God gave them up.” Here it’s to a “debased mind.” It literally means a mind that’s been tested and found “not genuine,” kind of like a phony metal or precious stone. It’s a mind that loses its integrity and authenticity, a mind that’s flawed and twisted, always making choices that are the exact opposite of what God would want. With a debased mind, there’s no telling what we’ll end up doing. Read verses 29–31. This list starts with a general kind of evil, then evil to other people, then evil pride toward God and parents, and ending up with a general loss of our basic humanity: “foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” Paul concludes in verse 32 that this debased mind becomes prevalent in society, where people now proclaim that what is good is evil, and what is evil is good (Isa5:20). When it’s centered on God, a human society can reinforce the truth about God and about what’s good and healthy for human beings. But without God, society becomes a dark and very confusing place.

So why does Paul want us to know the root of sin and how it progresses? It’s definitely *not* so that we can become more judgmental toward all the sinful people “out there.” Paul is soon going to say that we’re no better; we’re just the same (2:1; 3:9). Some interpret this passage as a warning and as a way to keep ourselves from evil. And there’s some merit to that. But what Paul seems to want to say most is that God’s wrath against us is so right, and our sin, so wrong. We may think we can ignore God and do whatever we want, but one day our sin will surely find us out, and then it may be too late (Nu32:23). Paul also emphasizes in this passage that all sin starts with the greatest evil: ingratitude toward God.

May God help each of us to walk by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and remember his grace every day, a grace we totally don’t deserve. May we keep growing in an appreciation of his grace and hold onto the truth of God no matter how dark the world around us becomes. May we each learn to honor God as God in all that we do.