

Romans: The Revealing of Righteousness (part 3 of 9)

The Tragedy of Unbelief

Romans 1:18-25

Mark Vroegop

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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. 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. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 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." (Romans 1:18–25, ESV)

A person could be the most talented surgeon or mechanic or quarterback or counselor or teacher but fail miserably without one key skill: the ability to properly diagnosis a problem. A surgeon needs to know the physical problem and its location in the body. A mechanic needs to know what part is malfunctioning. A quarterback needs to be able to read the defense. A counselor needs to identify root issues, and a teacher needs to know what hinders certain kids from learning.

A faulty diagnosis will inevitably lead to failure. No matter how good or smart or experienced you are, if you get the problem wrong, you will not only be unhelpful, but you can actually make things worse. So a right diagnosis of the problem is critical. Solutions are useless unless you know the problem.

Romans diagnoses the problem

This is just as true when it comes to spiritual things, and it helps us understand what we find next in the book of Romans. The last two Sundays we have looked at the overall message of the book (righteousness through the gospel), and we have seen the connection between righteousness and faith. Paul is explaining the good news of the gospel to the people in Rome. But in order for it to be good news, there must also be bad news. So for the next six weeks we are going to talk about sin, depravity, and the degradation of humanity. Romans 1:18-3:20 is all about the bad news.

Now before you freak out, check out, or walk out, let me tell you that every week we will be connecting this bad news back to the good news of the gospel. After all, that is why Paul wrote this book and why he included such a large section on the problem. He knows that an accurate diagnosis of the problem helps you know how to apply the solution. To say it another way: In order to know the beauty of the gospel, you have to understand the ugliness of sin.

So I hope that this section of Romans helps you love the gospel even more. But I also hope that it helps explain some things to you about yourself, your culture, suffering, and the brokenness of the world around us. You see, this section of Romans exegetes or explains the problem that every human being faces. This section is dark, and yet it is really helpful.

Unbelief has consequences

Our text today, Romans 1:18-25, contrasts what we read in 1:16-17. Hopefully you will remember that Paul's main point in those verses is the connection between righteousness and faith – "the righteous live by faith." This means that God's righteousness is given to those who believe, who put their trust in Jesus, or who live by faith. Belief, faith, and trust are all essentially saying the same thing. But this text is not just about belief or faith; it is about the righteousness that comes by faith. And when I say "righteousness," I mean both a right standing with God and the ability through the Holy Spirit to practice righteousness. There is a direct connection between faith and righteousness.

That is important to remember because in the same way that righteousness is connected to faith, so too is unrighteousness connected to unbelief. And verses 18-25 serve as the introduction to the connection between unbelief and unrighteousness. In fact, skip ahead to verse 25 and see this for yourself:

"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." (Romans 1:25, ESV)

Notice the connection between believing a lie instead of God and serving the creature rather than the creator. Remember last week when I said "ideas have consequences"? Well, unbelief has consequences too, and we see that very clearly here. Let's look at this text through the lens of five consequences connected to tragedy of unbelief.

1. Necessitates the wrath of God (v 18)

It is not a coincidence that Paul uses the words "revealed" and "unrighteousness" in verse 18. These should sound familiar, because he just used "revealed" and "righteousness" in verse 17 in reference to the gospel. Verse 18 is a direct contrast to the hope of verse 17, and that is why the word "for" starts the verse.¹ Paul is going to show us the negative backdrop against which the beauty of the gospel is displayed.

Paul begins this treatment with an important statement about the wrath of God. He says, *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men."* The idea is simply that the activities of unbelief in God – ungodliness and unrighteousness² – bring the wrath of God. Paul's diagnosis of the problem of our humanity is that we are under the wrath of God.

¹ For some reason that is strange to me, the NIV omits the word "for" and simply opts for "The wrath of God is being revealed . . ."

² Paul is likely not referring to two distinct forms of sinfulness but using these terms as one collective term for the depravity of mankind.

Now I need to explain this term because “the wrath of God” sounds vindictive, out of control, and rather unrighteous. But that is not the case. You need to see God’s wrath as His holy indignation or revulsion to the presence of sin. John Stott says that this is God’s pure and perfect antagonism to evil or His holy hostility to evil.³ God’s wrath is directly connected to His righteousness. God would not be righteous if moral rebellion against Him did not create a divine response. God’s wrath is necessary because unbelief and rebellion are real.

But you might ask, “What does the wrath of God look like?” In one sense the wrath of God is referring to an ultimate time of judgment on sin that is coming in the future. Romans 2:5 makes that pretty clear:

“But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.” (Romans 2:5, ESV)

However, the tense of “revealed” is present, meaning that it is continually happening. So there are other expressions of the wrath of God in the world today. I could name things like death, illness, and suffering. As we will see next week, the wrath of God means that humans live in world full of sexual immorality, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness, slander, haters of God, boastfulness, disobedience to parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, and ruthlessness (Rom 1:29-31). In other words, the wrath of God is expressed through a world that is terribly broken and is becoming increasingly more broken. So you need to look at the world and at your experience in the world through this lens. The world is broken because we have violated the righteousness of God.

Paul’s point here is really important. You see, God is not only revealing His righteousness through the gospel, but He is also revealing His wrath by allowing the brokenness of sin to send us a message. God warns us with His wrath, and He woos us with His mercy.⁴ Mercy says, “You can’t do this on your own!” And problems, illnesses, suffering, death and the degradation of our humanity – all expressions of His wrath – also say, “You can’t do this on your own.” God speaks both languages. The question is whether we are listening.

The very first sin in the Garden of Eden was caused by unbelief. Adam and Eve believed a lie, and the effect was separation from God. They experienced God’s revulsion against sin. Unbelief necessitates God’s wrath, and that is why we need the gospel not just in future but right now.

2. Leads to the active suppression of truth (v 18)

There is another important statement in verse 18 that we need to understand and one that should make us tremble towards the gospel. When Paul describes the people (“men”) who are committing ungodliness and unrighteousness, he says that they suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. What does this mean?

³ As cited in Mounce, Robert H. *Romans. The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995.

⁴ <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/the-wrath-of-god-against-ungodliness-and-unrighteousness>

It means that the truth about who God is – a truth that is being revealed through God’s wrath – is something that mankind, in general, refuses to believe. The idea is that the mercy and severity of God both declare that God is real, that you cannot run your own life, and that you need help. But we naturally resist this thought. Worse, we suppress this thought.

And the way that we do that is by committing acts of unrighteousness. Don’t miss this. Our suppression of the truth about God is active. It works like this: 1) we do things that we know are wrong, and we do them anyway, 2) when nothing immediately happens, we feel empowered, and 3) we do it again and again and again. In a strange and sick way, our unrighteous deeds begin to convince us that what we are doing is not really that bad even though when you look back at your life, it is hard to believe you could think this way. Unrighteousness suppresses the truth, and at the core is unbelief.

You believe that you are right; God is wrong; you know better; God is mistaken. And the unbelief in your soul about God leads you to tamp down what you should know to be true. This is why the sinful acts that we commit are not just little indiscretions; they are an insurgent attempt to silence the rational and right thought: “God is not going to be okay with this. I’m not going to get away with this.” And this is also why sin is never static. The activity of unrighteousness temporarily silences your sense of God’s authority in your life. For a few seconds, minutes, or years – you think you are God! We know we are not God. But our sin seems to say, “Oh yes you are!”

Now this is yet another reason why we need the gospel! We do not just need a behavior change; we need a complete reorientation of the heart.

3. Causes an inexcusable denial of God (vv 19-20)

The third effect of unbelief is a denial of God even though everything points to Him. Verses 19-20 link two important concepts: 1) the knowledge of God and 2) the plain evidence. This is stated rather clearly in verse 19: *“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.” (Romans 1:19, ESV)* The Bible tells us that God has revealed Himself to the world. In theological terms, it is often called general revelation, and it is defined as “the knowledge of God’s existence, character, and moral law which comes through creation to all humanity.”⁵ The idea is simply that human beings should be able to look at the created world, at history, and at the conscience within them and realize that God is real.

Verse 20 reiterates this point by driving home the connection between the created world and the character of God. *“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 . . .” (Romans 1:20, ESV)* In other words, God has provided sufficient evidence for Himself in creation. The beauty, complexity, creativity, and inter-connectedness of the creation point to a Creator. It takes a lot of work, often done in the name of “science,” to deny God’s existence, and even in that so-called science, there are huge leaps of faith. Creation was meant to awaken us to God’s existence so the gospel could bring us into fellowship with him.

⁵ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishers, 1994: 122-123.

Unbelief is at the core of looking at creation and thinking, “God did not do this.” That is not a science problem; it is a belief problem. Creation clarifies that God exists, and the effect is that no one can say, “I didn’t know you were real.” On the contrary: “... *they are without excuse*” (Rom. 1:20b). The unbelieving denial of God is inexcusable.

4. Degrades into self-worship (v 21-23)

The fourth step in this slide of unbelief relates to what human beings think about themselves. And it is not a pretty picture. Unbelief leads to perversion of worship. Unbelief leads to more unbelief. The progression is scary and common. Martin Luther believed that there were four steps⁶:

1. **Ingratitude** – “*For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him (v 21).*” There was no connection between the gifts and the Giver.
2. **Vanity** – “*but they became futile in their thinking ... (v 21)* Their thinking became worthless and hollow. Without God as their reference point, people lose their bearings but do not know it.
3. **Blindness** – “... their foolish hearts were darkened ... claiming to be wise, they became fools . . .” (v 22). Part of the tragedy is the irony of the arrogance of people who truly think that they are wise, when in reality they are foolish. This is a symptom of a spiritual blindness that has set in. They are unable to discern what is real and true.
4. **Departure (degradation)** – “*and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.*” (v 23). Do not let the words of verse 23 just pass by you. Understand what Paul is saying here! There is a decision to disregard and undervalue the glory of God when it is compared to the glory of man and the created order. The ultimate degradation happens here as mankind assesses God’s glory as inferior and less desirable than the attractiveness and worth of what they see in a mirror or in an image of something earthly. The inexpressible glory of the immortal God has been traded for the love of their own reflection. They could have had the sun but chose a matchstick instead.

And do you know what is crazy? According to verse 22, they thought that they were so wise in making this choice. But their unbelief is what had deluded them into this degradation. Remember Romans 1:25?

“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.” (Romans 1:25, ESV)

The natural condition of mankind is such that unbelief leads to self-worship – worshipping the creature rather than the Creator. This is the core of the problem that the Bible correctly diagnoses for us. Our lack of gratitude, our self-deception, our blindness, and our reckless behavior is rooted in a love of self. Boil down every sin and wrong desire that a human being has and you will find self-deification. The love and worship of self is at the heart of our rebellion against God.

⁶ As cited in Robert H. Mounce, *Romans, The New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995.

This is why, you see, the Bible talks about the heart and the way that the gospel can change a person. This is why Jesus told a religious ruler that he needed to be “born again” (John 3:3), and it is why He told the disciples that “what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart” (Matt. 15:18). Our unbelief degrades into self-worship.

It is no wonder that Paul connects the gospel with power! The righteousness of God that comes to you by faith creates a new orientation of the heart, which results in new desires and new thinking and new actions.

“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;” (2 Corinthians 5:17–18, ESV)

And how are you new? At your core you are no longer putting your faith in yourself; you are putting your faith in Jesus. In the very essence of your soul, you understand who you are and who God is. And when that belief-system lines up in a biblical framework, everything changes. You think differently, act differently, feel differently, and it is all because you have come to know the truth, and the truth has set you free (John 8:32). You have come to believe in Jesus, and by believing, you have life in His name (John 20:31).

But if you do not believe, then there are consequences.

5. Results in self-destruction (v 24-25)

The final two verses that we are going to examine today introduce the end result of unbelief. That is why the verse starts with the word “therefore.” There were other effects or consequences, but this is where it all leads. The previous verses mostly contained references to what humans have done in their unbelief. But Paul introduces a term that shows us what God does in response to human unbelief, and it is a phrase that should make us tremble: “God gave them up.”

Next week we are going to unpack the full extent of how this is expressed, particularly in the area of sexuality and of homosexuality in particular. I hope to show you why Paul raises the issue of sexuality and then also show you how he applies the same logic in other areas as well.

But for today, and in preparation for next week, I simply want you to understand the meaning of “God gave them up.” There are a few things that I want to know about this phrase:

First, it is directly tied to the exchange of unbelief. We began our study today by looking at verse 25 which identified for us the problem of unbelief and unrighteousness – *“exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator”* (Rom. 1:25). This connection is so important that Paul makes it very clear by starting verse 24 with the word “therefore” and beginning verse 25 with “because.” This is what happens when unbelief takes root.

Second, God’s judgment on unbelief is to allow human beings to do what they want. God hands them over to their sin, allowing disobedience to run its destructive course. Paul uses this term

three times close together in Romans 1 to make this point evident (1:24, 26, 28). The most apparent consequence of unbelief is God removing any restraint and allowing people to follow the sinful desires of their hearts.

Now just think about that with me for a moment and how it fits with the argument of Romans. Paul is making the case for the need of the gospel, showing us that works will not work. And to make that point clear, he shows us that the ultimate expression of our sinfulness is the way in which we are pursuing our own self-destruction. Here is another way to say this: “When man attempts to escape from God into freedom, the result really is that he falls prey to the forces of corruption.”⁷ Do you understand what this means?

It means that when sin becomes easier and more expansive and more creative and more risky and more frequent, then you are not experiencing freedom; you are actually experiencing judgment! It means that in our unbelief in the worth of God’s glory, we make a choice that is insane. We choose ourselves over God. And in making that choice of ourselves over the glory of God, we walk a path toward self-destruction. In the pursuit of worshipping ourselves, we destroy ourselves.

Not convinced? Just think of what would happen if you said whatever you wanted, committed any action that came to mind, spent money on whatever you desired, or just basically did whatever you wanted to do without thought of morals or consequences. Where would that lead? I’m sure you know someone (maybe it’s you) who pursued that kind of life for a while. You know how tragic it is, because the person, through his or her actions, is self-destructing.

But do you know what is underneath their self-destruction? Unbelief in God. They have exchanged the truth about God for a lie. Everything is tied back to this matter of belief or worship. The self-destructive patterns in a person’s life are just the expression of a worship problem. And this is why the book of Romans is so helpful. It helps us to properly diagnose the real issue of humanity, the world, and our culture.

The Powerful Solution

The reason that Paul writes this kind of material all the way through Romans 3:20 is to point us away from ourselves and to the gospel. My aim in walking you through this text is to help you see yourself, your heart, your actions, and the gospel more clearly.

There are some of you here today, who by your actions and the ease with which you are disobeying God, think you are getting away with it. You may have begun thinking, “This really isn’t that big of an issue . . . my life is turning out okay.” And I’m here to tell you: “You are believing a lie.” You are on a path to self-destruction in this life and in eternity. I would plead with you to see the path that you are on for what it really is.

The first step for all of us is to see ourselves and the problem clearly. We have to come to the realization that the real problem in life is our sin – this deeply embedded passion to be our own

⁷ A. Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. C. C. Rasmussen. Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1949: 111.

God, to run our own lives. Everything flows from that belief. Our unbelief in God has consequences.

And finally, this is why the gospel is such good news. It means that by realizing our problem, we can put our faith in the work of Jesus. We can come to terms with the fact that we need a change so fundamental, so deep, and so transformative that only God can do it. You see, the problem of our sin is so deluding and so destructive that it takes the power of God to eclipse sin's attraction and effect.

We need to be saved from ourselves. And Romans 1 helps us to see that clearly.

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