

Romans: We Have No Excuse

Romans 1:18-20

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, chapter 1, verse 18. We're continuing to work our way through this glorious epistle of Paul to the Romans. The last time we were together we were in verses 16 and 17 where Paul announces the theme of his entire book. And today we begin what is the first section proper. Everything before verse 18 is really Paul's introduction and now he begins a long section that runs all the way to chapter 3 verse 20 in which he sets forth, very frankly, the bad news. Paul knows that unless you understand the bad news, you cannot understand and appreciate the good news.

Now there's another thing we need to know in order to appreciate what we're going to learn in verse 18 today, and that is to know what Paul has said in verse 17. And I'd like you to look at it a moment. In verse 17, Paul says something surprising. In fact, Paul tells us that one of the things that causes his heart to beat quickly when he thinks about the gospel, is that in it the righteousness of God is revealed. As we said last time, that's not how we would have said it had we been writing Romans. We would have said that in the gospel the grace of God is revealed. Or we would have said that in the gospel the mercy of God is revealed. Or we would have said that in the gospel the love of God is revealed. And let me just pause and say Paul believes all those things. In fact, much of his book is going to talk about the grace and the mercy and the love of God revealed in the gospel. But for now, as he's stating his thesis, that's not what he's focusing on and that's not what he's rejoicing in. He's rejoicing in the fact that in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed.

Now why would that cause Paul's heart to be moved? Well, let's go back and think for a moment about this man before his conversion. As a Pharisee the apostle Paul was pursuing with zeal and activity the goal of pleasing God by exterminating Christians. He had vested the whole of his being in reducing the numbers of these people whom he considered to be blasphemers. People who are heretics. People who were an affront to God. And as he did so he thought that he was gaining favor with God. He thought that he was pleasing God. And when he met the Lord Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, or rather when the Lord Jesus Christ met him, suddenly Paul saw that everything that he thought

that was good that he had been doing was, in fact, not getting him closer to God, but was actually pushing him further away. Or I could put it another way, it was bringing him closer to God for judgment rather than for blessing. Paul suddenly realized that all his righteousness was as filthy rags, and that all his deeds only earned him condemnation. And so he saw face to face the glorious grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to save a wretch like him. Paul could have sung "Amazing Grace" with conviction. All of us ought to be able to sing it with conviction. Paul especially could have sung that song with great conviction. He could have sung "And Can It Be" with great conviction, because he knew what he was.

But when he sees the gospel, he's stunned again because he realizes that the way God saves him by grace is not a way that causes God to sweep his sins under the carpet. The way in which God saves is a righteous way so that even in the gospel God's righteousness is revealed. It's righteous because instead of sweeping Paul's sins under the carpet, God dealt with those sins. He caused His Son to live the life that Paul ought to have lived. He caused His Son to die the death that Paul ought to have died. And then he gave Paul credit for it because of the covenant promises He had made to Abraham and suddenly Paul's mind is blown, and he says, "Lord, you have saved me by grace. But Christ has earned me by His righteousness." This is unbelievable. In the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed. And it's also revealed that our own righteousness can never suffice. No, an alien righteousness, Christ's righteousness must be obtained by faith. And this is what Paul's heart exults in, that the gospel reveals the righteousness of God from faith to faith.

Now, understanding that will help you understand what he says today. So let's hear God's word in Romans, chapter 1, verses 18 through 20:

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness; because, that which is known about God is evident within them, for God made it evident to them. 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."

Our Lord and our God, as we come before the gospel this day, we ask that You would speak to us by Your Scriptures and apply that truth to our hearts by the Spirit so that we would see our sin; and we would see the fact that it deserves to be condemned, and we would see Your condemnation of it, Your judgment of it, Your wrath against it. And then that we would see the Savior in all His gospel glory. These things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

My friends, the gospel makes no sense without two things. Sin and God's wrath. Apart from your sin and mine, the gospel makes no sense. If I have no sin to be saved from, the message of salvation is utterly unintelligible. It's irrelevant. If I don't need saving, the message of salvation may sound nice, but it's not relevant,

it's not significant. Apart from God's wrath against sin, the gospel makes no sense because the gospel is the story of God's amazing, loving, gracious, redemption of us from his own wrath because of our sin. And the apostle Paul knows that it makes no sense to tell us the good news unless we have fully appreciated the bad news. And so, from Romans, chapter 1, verse 18 to Romans, chapter 3, verse 20, the apostle Paul is going to make sure that we understand the bad news. Before he ever gets to elaborating on the glorious truths which he has hinted at in the first seventeen verses of Romans in which he has outlined for us in Romans 1, 16 and 17. He's going to spend a good long time to make sure we appreciate just what God is saving us from. But my friends, the gospel truth of the bad news is under assault today. It's not very popular today. It's not even popular amongst Christians. Now we make fun of hellfire and brimstone preachers. I can remember as a young Presbyterian going to my grandparents' church, a Southern Baptist church in mid-Florida, and hearing the preacher become considerably exercised during the sermon as he was preaching against sin and about hell. And I turned to my grandfather and spoke out loud and said, "Granddaddy, who's he mad at?" We sometimes think it's a bit humorous when we hear hot gospellers preaching hellfire and brimstone. But I want to pause and say this. The basic truth being taught by those who warn us against God's judgment against sin is absolutely Pauline, and it's absolutely biblical. And more than that it's absolutely essential that we understand it and embrace it, because we live in a culture that is uncomfortable with the idea of sin; it's uncomfortable with the idea of evil; it's uncomfortable with the idea of depravity; it's uncomfortable with the idea of the wrath of God. Derek Thomas, on Wednesday night, during our series on prayer quoted Carl Menninger's famous book titled *Whatever Happened to Sin?* This was a social scientist, a psychologist in the early 1970's saying, you know, sin seems to have disappeared from our collective cultural conscience. Wonder what happened? Then it's true, isn't it? Alan Bloom in his book *The Closing of the American Mind* says that he has seen a succession of generations, or a succession of classes of students come into his courses at the University of Chicago, and he found that none of them believed in evil and none of them believed in sin. And so he would ask them in the course of teaching them humanities, can you name for me an evil person? And he was stunned by the fact that none of them had any personal experience of a person that they would have characterized as a person who did evil things. In fact, the only people that they could come up with were people with whom they had no relationship. Invariably, he said, the top two evil people on their list in those days of the 1970's were Hitler and Richard Nixon. It was the University of Chicago and it was the 1970's mind you, but they had no personal experience of someone that they would indicate as a person who was evil.

Furthermore, we don't like the idea of depravity today. And certainly not the idea of universal depravity. I mean we're good people. Surely God couldn't have that much against us. We're good people here. Furthermore, we no longer believe in the wrath of God do we? In fact, we feel a lot of Christian theologians today working very hard to make sure that Christians don't believe in the wrath of God.

But ironically, I want you to understand that not believing in the wrath of God does not lead you into believing in a god who is more loving. It leads you to believing in a god who is less loving. That's a shocking statement, I know. But I want to demonstrate it for you as we look at Paul's words today. There are two or three things I'd like you to see.

I. God's righteous wrath is revealed against sin, all sin and all sinners.

First of all look at verse 18. In verse 18 Paul says God's righteous wrath is revealed against sin, against all sin, against all sinners. Why is Paul saying this? Because he wants us to understand that the gospel is necessary. Look at the parallel between verse 17 and verse 18. In the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed: in creation from heaven, in providence and in our hearts. What does verse 18 say is revealed? The wrath of God. In the gospel the righteousness of God. But now the wrath of God is revealed. What Paul is doing in this whole section is explaining why we need a righteousness that is by faith alone. Why we need the good news of the gospel, and why the good news is so good. He's telling us here why the gospel is necessary. And to do it he announces the bad news. And the bad news is God's wrath is upon the ungodly and the unrighteous.

Now, I'm perfectly aware that our generation is uncomfortable with the idea of people who are not good. It's uncomfortable with the idea of wrath, and it's particularly uncomfortable with the idea that the wrath of God can be combined with any meaningful use of the idea that God is love. Now I want to tackle each of those with you for a few moments. Notice what Paul says here. Two things in particular in verse 18.

He says that God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. In those two terms he indicates both impiety, ungodliness and immorality. He indicates a lack of God-centeredness in our thinking, believing, living, in our attitudes, in our priorities and our actions, and he indicates contempt for God's law. He indicates there both a rebellion against God and a rebellion against His word. Both impiety and immorality. And he says that that is in fact the condition of all men. In fact, he characterizes mankind and the Gentiles in particular as those who suppress the truth and unrighteousness. These are not people who are ignorant of the truth. They know the truth, but they work very hard not to allow it to have any impact on their thinking, their living, their believing, their worshiping. And so the apostle Paul says the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against them. And I want you to note what that indicates. That indicates that they know that their actions are wrong. Paul is saying here that the wrath of God is being revealed continually, not only in biblical events like God's judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah, or God's judgment against Nineveh way after the time of Jonah. But it's being revealed in his providence as laws are enacted to punish those who were guilty. As nations are brought under the searching judgment of God, God's wrath is shown. In other words, these

people see that there is a right and a wrong because God visits punishment and justice and judgment. And so the wrath of God is being revealed everywhere they see the wrath of God is being revealed. So Paul tells us that these people suffer from ungodliness, and they suffer from unrighteousness. They suppress the truth; and they know the difference between right and wrong, and they see the wrath of God being revealed. And yet they do not run to God; they do not flee to Christ; they do not embrace the gospel; they are under God's rightful condemnation. What is Paul doing here? He is arguing in these three verses that God's wrath is just, that it is right for God to be angry against sin. That it is right for God to be in a posture of readiness to judge those who were in rebellion against Him. That is what Paul is doing here.

Now look, I realize we are up against it. We are up against a culture that doesn't believe that people are evil. We're up against a culture that doesn't believe that wrath is right. They equate wrath with hate. And we're up against a culture that doesn't believe that wrath and love are compatible. But Paul has already started off by characterizing mankind as a whole as worthy of judgment, as ungodly and unrighteous.

And then he goes on in these verses to indicate the rightness of God's wrath. Now look, there are two basic objections to the idea of the wrath of God. Often times, it is assumed that wrath or anger is immoral. And if it's wrong to have wrath and anger for us, then it's certainly unworthy of God to be wrathful or angry. Secondly, it is assumed that wrath is incompatible with the idea of divine love. But let me respond to those very briefly, my friends.

First of all, Paul himself indicates in Ephesians, chapter 4, verse 26 that it is possible for us to be angry and not to sin. There he tells us in our anger we are not to sin, which indicates that even for us there can be a righteous indignation which does not involve us devolving into sin. There can be a righteous anger on our part that does not necessitate our sins. Such as when we see something that is absolutely wrong, and we hate it. So if that's true for us, how much more is that true for God?

Secondly, with regard to this idea that wrath is incompatible with the idea of divine love, I'd say it the other way around. Anger, righteous indignation is a function of goodness. Goodness is necessary to true love. Therefore, in order to truly love, you must be capable of righteous indignation against that which is a violation of it. Let me put that another way. A god who cannot be angry is a god who cannot love. In fact, if you cannot be angry against wrong, you are a person who cannot love.

Let me demonstrate. Now let me ask you for a moment, friends, to hold your hearts in your hands. You know that I don't try and shock you, and I'm not trying to make some sort of a direct appeal to the emotions right now. I am asking you, in what I am about to share with you, to think of the moral response of your heart

to what I'm about to describe. We have heard much about partial birth abortion in these last months. There's a case before the Supreme Court right now. We talk about it antiseptically. Listen to this description by a nurse, Brenda Pratt Shafer as to what she saw when she participated in what was her final, partial birth abortion. "Dr. Haskell brought the ultra-sound in and hooked it up so he could see the baby. On the ultra-sound screen I could see the heartbeat. Dr. Haskell went in with the forceps and grabbed the baby's legs and pulled them down into the birth canal. He delivered the baby, his whole body, the arms, everything but the head. The baby's little fingers were clasping and unclasping, and his little feet were kicking, and then the doctor stuck the scissors in the back of his head. The baby's arm jerked out like a startle reflex, like a flinch, like a baby does when he thinks he's going to fall. The doctor opened up the scissors and stuck a high-powered suction tube into the opening. The baby went completely limp. I was totally unprepared for what I was seeing. Next, Dr. Haskell delivered the baby's head. He cut the umbilical cord. He delivered the placenta; and he threw the baby in the pan, along with the placenta and the instruments that he had used to perform the abortion." She goes on to say that, "That baby boy had the most perfect angelic face that I think I have ever seen in my life."

Now I don't know what your reaction to that is. There are a lot of words that come to my mind. Revulsion. Indignation. Anger. Wrath. And I want to say that if you cannot be angry about infanticide, and that is what that is, then you are incapable of human love. And I do not worship a God who is indifferent about that type of immoral behavior. To say that God does not care about that kind of behavior is to say that God is amoral. And you know, I think if somebody came up to you today and told you that you are amoral, you wouldn't take it as a compliment. Well, my friends, anger against wrong is not the antithesis of love, it is necessary for love. And my friends, in the reaction that you have had to that little description that I just gave you, you have just seen a glimpse of the heart of God against sin. You have seen that there is such a thing as absolute wrong. There is such a thing as evil and people do it. You have seen that it is not better, it's worse not to be wrathful against that evil. And I must say I can't think of a punishment, a human punishment that does justice to what that act deserves.

Oh, my friends, don't fall into the trap of thinking that you can have the good news without the bad news, and don't fall into the trap of thinking that you can even have an apprehension of what the love and grace of God means without understanding what your sin deserves. You know many things ran into my mind as I read those facts that were sent that to me this past Tuesday. I didn't read them until Wednesday, and I made the mistake of reading it right before Prayer Meeting, and I was shell shocked before I walked into Prayer Meeting. But let me say that one of the things that ran through my mind is "Lord God, what does my sin deserve?"

I want to pause. There may be unbelievers in this congregation who are sitting here thinking right now, "Oh, there they go, a bunch of right-wing, conservative

Christians that are pounding on abortion again." And that's not the point, friends. Paul's point is that everyone, everyone in the world, apart from Christ, is under the rightful condemnation of God. And what we've just read is just evidence of that fact. Oh my friends, the gospel makes no sense until we realize our sin, until we realize that we deserve condemnation and conversely our sin and God's wrath make it clear why the gospel is necessary for salvation. You know you often hear people glibly say, "Of course God will forgive you. That's His business." Take that statement inside of that abortuary for a moment. We may never treat God's forgiveness in that of glib expectant sort of way. The most surprising thing in the world is that God forgives. The most surprising thing in the world is that I don't get what I deserve. And Paul is glorying in the gospel because he knows the bad news. He knows what he deserves, and he knows what God has given him instead. Now my friends, have you come face to face with your sin, and have you been able to say, "Yes Lord, that is what I deserve." Your judgment of me is right. If you have, and if you've turned to Christ, then you know what it is to experience the joy of the good news. But if you don't agree in God's judgment of you, if you don't think that you're evil, if you don't think that you need salvation, then there is no salvation for you in the good news, because the good news is for sinners.

One of the officers of the church reminded me after the early service that Paul himself says Christ died for the ungodly. That's who He died for. He died for the ungodly. If you don't think you're ungodly, Christ didn't die for you. Christ died for the ungodly. Jesus Himself said, "I came, I came for sinners, not for the righteous." My friends, if we insist upon justifying ourselves, then Christ's salvation is not for us. God's wrath is just, and Paul is saying that it's being revealed against sin.

II. There is no such thing as an atheist.

Then if you would look in verse 19. Paul carries out this argument. He is explaining in verse 19 the reason for his wrath. And he's telling us in verse 19 that God's wrath is justified because we know God and yet are ungodly. God's wrath is justified because He is known among the peoples. Look what he says: "Because that which is known about God is evident within them, for God made it evident to them." There is no such thing as an atheist, Paul is saying. There's no such thing as an atheist, an agnostic. No one can claim ignorance. The apostle Paul says everyone knows God because God Himself has made Himself evident to them. All men have a knowledge of God, not just a bear awareness of his existence. They are not blind in this sense. They know God. God is plainly seeing. He is evident within them. And so our suppression, the suppression that he talks about in verse 18, is culpable. You can't suppress something you don't have. And suppressing that knowledge of the truth makes us liable for sin. Listen to what Donald McCloud says. "It is because we know the truth that man's godliness is inexcusable."

Paul's argument is not that a man's ignorance is inexcusable because God's revelation is so clear, but that man's religious behavior, or lack of it, is inexcusable because man is not ignorant. Paul is saying we know, and we still don't worship; we still don't obey, we still don't love God; we still don't love our neighbor. We know it, and we don't do it. We rebel against it. Sin is whole-soul rebellion against God. There's no such thing as an atheist. Often people say well what about the native in Africa. That's not a very politically correct thing to ask anymore, but you know what they're getting at. And Paul's answer is quick. It's at the tip of his tongue. And he says there's nobody who doesn't know. We don't have to go out and tell them the gospel so that they know the one true God. Paul says they already know the one true God, and they choose not to worship Him, or reverence Him, or adore Him, or obey him, or believe Him. They all know, and they suppress the truth. God is known in the heart of every person Paul says, and therefore, God's wrath is justified.

III. God's nature, eternity and power are made known through His creation.

And then he continues to carry out this argument in verse 20. Look with me there. Paul elaborates on that shocking truth. The ungodly, he says, are without a defense. They're without excuse because they know so much about God. Paul pauses in verse 20 and shows us one way that God has revealed Himself by His creation. And he says, not just that God is known, that His existence is known because of creation, he says that God's nature, His eternity, His power are made known through His creation. That is stunning. He says it's not just that you work till the end of a syllogism based on the design argument and you can see that it is a good possibility that a god exists. That's not what Paul says. Paul says the world, creation itself shows you that the one true God exists. And you even see something of His eternity. The world is not eternal; He is. You can see something of His power. The world didn't create itself; He did. You can see something of His attributes, His wisdom, His perfection, His goodness, and even His judgment as you look at the world around you. Paul is not merely asserting that God is revealed, but that He has been clearly seen.

Look at the words of verse 20: "Has been clearly seen and understood." It's not that God just displays His truth in the heavens, it comes home. It's received. We get it and we still suppress it. And then Paul turns to the language of the law courts. We often poke fun at our friends in the legal profession, but I want you to see Paul here borrowing his very language from the law courts of his day. He uses a word *without excuse*. You see it there in verse 20. That is a technical Greco-Roman legal term. If you were accused of a crime, and you were called to stand in the dock before the judge and jury, you would have been required to give an *apologia*, a defense. You would be required to defend yourself. If you were unable to defend yourself, you were said to be *unapologia*, without a defense. Paul says that because of these things, we stand before God

unapologias. We stand before Him without an excuse. We have nothing to say for ourselves. You know there are a lot of people who think they will argue with God on the last day. They're going to give Him a good what for. The apostle Paul says every mouth will be shut on that day because there is no defense against this. They've known, they've suppressed. They are created in the image of God, yet they were ungodly. They had the law of God written on their heart, yet they were unrighteous. They were in rebellion against God, and everybody in the world falls into that camp unless they're in Christ Jesus. And the apostle Paul says this is why the good news is so good to me, because that's where we are, whether you like it not, that is where we are. That's where I was, and that's what I deserved. I deserved condemnation. But God in His goodness, in His love, in His grace, in His mercy has saved me through the righteousness of Christ. All I did was trust on the Lord Jesus Christ alone for my salvation as is offered in the gospel, and I became a child of God.

That's why the good news is so good. If you pass by, if you cast aside, if you deny the bad news, the good news ceases to be good. And what's worse, God ceases to be God. But the good news is the good news is true, because the bad news is true. You know the bad news is the one thing that you can prove empirically in this life. And so there's one thing left for us to do. Come, for the feast is spread. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, it is the great wonder of our life that You have spread the table of the gospel feast for sinners such as we. So I pray that everyone who is weary and heavy laden, in need of rest, in need of forgiveness, sensing their sin, sensing Your wrath, they would come to Christ today and trust in Him and believe on Him and commit themselves to Him, to live by Him. I ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

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