

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part four

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Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

WHY BRILLIANT PEOPLE CAN BE SPIRITUALLY BLIND

In **Romans 1:16-17** Paul sets out the theme of this great letter - **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. [17] For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'"** The assumption of these words is the *universal need* for salvation. Both the religious Jews and the pagan Gentiles need salvation.

In this next major section of the letter (**1:18-3:20**) Paul establishes the truth of that assumption. He takes several chapters to unfold the world-wide need of the Gospel. Paul takes great care to spell out the guilt of both *Gentile* and *Jew* before God (this reverses the order from **1:16**). For Christians these are some of the most important chapters in the entire Bible. They deal with what has gone wrong with this world and why. The rest of the letter to the Romans is built on this foundation.

Today we will only examine the first part of Paul's argument. We will examine why the entire *Gentile world* desperately needs the power of the gospel.

1) **IT IS KEY TO UNDERSTANDING PAUL'S VIEW OF THE NEED FOR THE GOSPEL THAT WE UNDERSTAND THE NATURE OF HUMAN SINFULNESS**

Romans 1:18 - **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all *ungodliness and unrighteousness* of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."**

Ungodliness and unrighteousness"(18). The order of terms here is of great importance. The *source* of unrighteousness is ungodliness. Specific acts of sin and immorality stem from mankind *pushing God to the outskirts of reference*. Paul says mankind does this by refusing to honor and worship God as God.

This *proper diagnosis* of the real problem is necessary. Man's biggest problem isn't that he lies, cheats or steals. Those are the *results*, not the *cause* of his problem. Our text says the root of sin is the failure to *"honor Him as God,"* and *"give thanks to Him"* - **Romans 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."**

There is no proper understanding of the Biblical concept of *sin* until this point is grasped - ***all sin is fundamentally unbelief. Unbelief is the cause of all sin.*** This is what Paul is driving at in that twenty-first verse. And you can trace the truth of his words right back to the fall of mankind in the garden. Eve's sin *wasn't* eating the forbidden fruit. That was the *fruit* of her sin - the *outward expression* of her sin. Her sin was listening to the tempter.

The tempter came and convinced her that any restriction placed on her was proof that God wasn't worthy of trust - that God was not as loving as he appeared to be. And Eve failed to *"honor God"* (to use Paul's words) the moment she placed more trust in her own instincts than God's perfect will.

This is what I meant when I said *all sin is unbelief* manifested in one form or another. And there are dozens of examples of this. Consider Paul's instruction in **Romans 12:18-19** - **"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. [19] Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"**

What is the sin in these verses. If you say taking vengeance you would be wrong. Taking personal vengeance is the **result** of sin. The sin is **unbelief**. When I take personal vengeance into my own hands to do not **believe** I can trust my injustice to God. I do not believe He will always look after the scales of universal justice.

This is the root sin. This is what Paul means when he traces the root of all other iniquity to mankind's failure to **"honor God as God"**(Romans 1:21).

And this is the proper explanation of those confusing words of Paul is **Romans 14:23** - **"....For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."**

If you want to avoid sin you have to do more than just avoid bad deeds. You have to life live trusting in and honoring God from the heart. There is no proper understanding of either **sin** or **righteousness** apart from this.

Here's the same theology from **CALVIN AND HOBBS**:

Calvin - I'm getting nervous about Christmas

Hobbes - You're worried you haven't been good?

Calvin - That's just the problem. It's all relative. What's Santa's definition? How good do you have to be to qualify as good? I haven't killed anybody. That's good, right? I haven't committed any felonies. I didn't start any wars. Wouldn't you say that's pretty good? Wouldn't you say I should get a lot of presents?

Hobbes - But maybe good is more than just the absence of bad.

Calvin - See, that's what worried me.

2) **HUMAN SIN AND MISERY DOESN'T HAVE ITS PRIMARY ROOT IN A LACK OF KNOWLEDGE**

Romans 1:18 - **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."**

The important point here is the element of **rebellion**. Before he is a seeker of truth man is a rebel who must lay down his arms. Paul says that man's problem isn't that God has set Himself out of reach. Rather, he naturally tends to **suppress the truth of God he has available to him**.

Paul makes this point again in **verse 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."** Man's real problem, says Paul, is that he refuses to submit to what is **"clearly perceived"**(20).

With these words Paul introduces the concept of **general revelation** (what God has revealed about Himself to all mankind) - **vs. 19-20** - **"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."**

This revelation (conscience and creation) is called **general** for two reasons:

- a) **Because it has a general audience in that it is for all people** . This is not so with other forms of divine revelation - **1 Corinthians 2:14** - **"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they**

are spiritually discerned.”

- b) ***This revelation is called general because its content is general.*** It doesn't reveal the whole plan of God's salvation in Jesus Christ. It does, however, reveal God's ***existence*** and His ***power***. Man refuses this revelation because it points to a God who is contrary to man's fallen life-style.

3) **PAUL EXPLAINS WHY MANKIND CAN BE BRILLIANT IN MUCH OF HIS THINKING YET FOOLISH IN HIS THOUGHTS OF GOD**

Romans 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.***”

Notice the phrase, “***they became futile in their thinking***”(21). While still sharp in much of his thinking he can only muster ***futility*** and ***foolishness*** in his unaided thinking about God. This is God's assessment of man's best thoughts and efforts at finding meaning in life apart from Him. This is so important. The real bondage in sin is not merely that it makes man ***wicked***. It also makes him ***futile*** - empty and foolish - in his approaches to his own deepest needs and God's best solution. The root issue here is mankind's innate ***bias*** against God.

The prophet Jeremiah saw this same sin unfolding in his own day - **Jeremiah 8:8-9** - “How can you say, 'We are wise, and the law of the Lord is with us'? But behold, the lying pen of the scribes has made it into a lie. [9] The wise men shall be put to shame; they shall be dismayed and taken; behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord, so what wisdom is in them?”

4) **THE GENESIS OF SIN AND ITS EFFECT ON OUR WORLD**

Romans 1:23-25 - “...and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. [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.”

All sin flows from man's refusal to put God at the center. Every other wickedness flows out of this. Man's ultimate sin is his worship of himself. He places material, creature-centered things, rather than the Giver and Creator of all at the center of his affections and pursuits. Because man has geared his life to the visible tangible world of the five senses, he has become a victim of his own physical desires. He is still a worshiper. But he now worships the work of his own hands.

For more on the theology of this whole process see Paul's teaching in **Ephesians 2:1-3** and **4:17-19** - **Ephesians 2:1-3** - “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins [2] in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— [3] among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, ***carrying out the desires of the body and the mind***, and were ***by nature children of wrath***, like the rest of mankind....**4:17-19** - “Now this I say and testify in the Lord, that you must no longer walk as the Gentiles do, in ***the futility of their minds***. [18] 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***. [19] They have ***become callous*** and have ***given themselves up*** to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.”

5) **GOD'S PRESENT JUDGEMENT ON HUMAN REBELLION**

Romans 1:26-32 - "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 decree that those who practice such things deserve to die (the wages of sin is death), *they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*"

Again, Paul restates the reason for God's judgment. He wants to make sure we get this right - **Romans 1:28** - "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." This is not an arbitrary judgment on God's part. God doesn't first *abandon* man. Rather, man *dethrones* his Creator God.

We don't have time to do these powerful verses justice. But, very briefly, Paul says God has one primary way of revealing his just wrath and judgment against what mankind has done. Three times he repeats that God *"gave them up"* (24, 26, 28).

This is not the *only* kind of execution of God's wrath in the Scriptures. Some are more recognizable and direct. And God's judgement will be more *immediately* executed when Jesus comes again.

This particular judgment, however, is perfectly matched to the sin. Man makes the choice to worship himself rather than the Creator. All bad religion flows out of this choice. Idolatry is the fruit of inwardly turned desire and worship. And because man refuses to *honor* God, God allows man to fully *dishonor* himself and others.

The details of this are spelled out in **verses 26-31**. When mankind inverts God's creation the *first* place infected is human sexuality. That's because the image of the God who is Trinity - unity *and* diversity linked together - has designed heterosexual passion and union to reflect *sameness* and *diversity*. When the Triune Creator is dethroned man's sexual passions are the first place the distorted image of God in His creation is obvious.

Finally, Paul carefully finishes this chapter with the only approach a foolish, fallen mankind has for justifying such blind rebellion - **Romans 8:32** - "Though they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them *but give approval to those who practice them.*"

These are such relevant words. *Behold mankind's persistent love for measuring righteousness by polls and surveys*. This will always stack the deck in his favor. Because the objective, unchanging standard of God's revelation always *confronts* man's disobedience, *the most reassuring way of determining moral truth is to probe the values of fellow sinners*. The blind leading the blind.

More on this next week.