

## Romans 1:8-32: The Church, the Culture & the Gospel

by Pastor Jason Van Bommel

<sup>8</sup> First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. <sup>9</sup> For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you <sup>10</sup> always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. <sup>11</sup> For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— <sup>12</sup> that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. <sup>13</sup> I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. <sup>14</sup> I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. <sup>15</sup> So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> 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.

<sup>26</sup> For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; <sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup> 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.

### Introduction: How Shall We Live?

On Tuesday, Americans elected a new president, and the election revealed, in a similar way to previous elections, that we live in a deeply divided country. And while the divisions remain similar to previous elections, the emotional reaction to this one has been very intense. Perhaps it's the rise of social media or President-elect Trump's polarizing personality and offensive comments, or maybe it's both, but strong emotional reactions and some ugly and hateful actions have been manifested by both sides.

But we are not here to discuss politics, at least not in that sense. We are gathered together as the people of God to hear from our Lord, to hear what our eternal King speaks to us at this time. We live in this time

and in this culture, and we live our lives under the eternal, unshakable, unimpeachable, irrevocable reign of the King of kings and Lord of lords, who is our King and our Lord. He was not voted into office. He cannot be voted out of office. He will never die and He will never resign. More importantly for us, perhaps: His word never changes and His call to His church remains as clear and consistent today as it was last week.

We will work our way through today's text backwards: First we will look at the bad news problem in verses 18-32 and then we will come back to verses 8-17 for the good news solution.

## **I. The Bad News: Man's Rebellion & God's Wrath (vv. 18-32)**

Verse 18 opens with a startling declaration: *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men"* This is a present tense indicative verb, which means that the wrath of God is presently actually being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness. We will look first at the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men and then at the wrath of God that is currently being revealed.

Many people have observed that verses 18-32 read like the perfect description of contemporary American culture. Paul wrote this 2,000 years ago, describing the pagan, non-Jewish, gentile culture of the Roman Empire. Romans 1:18-32 is Paul's indictment against the pagan culture, while Romans 2 is his indictment against Jewish religious culture, and then chapter 3, verses 1-20 summarize the just condemnation of both Jews and Gentiles – of all humanity – under God's righteous standard of the law.

So, Romans 1:18-32 is not a prophetic description of American culture specifically, nor is it merely a description of first-century pagan Roman culture. It is a universal description of pagan, idolatrous, God-less culture, while chapter 2 is a description of hypocritical God-professing religious culture. While America remained a more Christian nation, Romans 2 was a better description of our culture, but as we move into being a post-Christian, neo-pagan culture, Romans 1:18-32 is more descriptive.

### **a. Denying God: No Honor & No Thanks**

After stating the present reality of God's wrath, Paul explains how people suppress the truth about God in unrighteousness: *"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."*

God has clearly revealed Himself to the world in the things He has made. The world around us is alive with the visible manifestations of the invisible attributes of God. Every sunrise, every sunset, every starry sky, every flower, every tree, every use of our wonderful hands, every use of the marvel of language, every flight of a migratory bird, every scouting mission of a honeybee – all creation speaks of the Creator, but people suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

Paul says this suppression is a refusal to honor God as God and a refusal to give thanks to Him. When you're given a gift, you acknowledge the giver and say thank you. God gives us life and breath and a beautiful world full of wonders that have kept us busy exploring for millennia, and we refuse to honor Him as the creator or to thank Him for His gifts. We refuse. It's not that we can't see, it's that we won't see.

The result of this suppression of the truth is futile thinking and darkened hearts. We don't think the way we should, thinking God's thoughts after Him. We don't love the way we should, loving what God loves and hating what God hates. Instead, rebellious, truth-suppressing human thinking is empty and vain and useless and God-rejecting hearts are foolish and dark.

### **b. Embracing Idols**

And yet it is not true that denying the one true God leaves us with no god at all. Paul says, "*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.*" The natural and inevitable result of a denial of God is the embracing of idolatry. If we will not have the one true God to be our God, then something else will take His place in our hearts.

But what exactly is idolatry? What are our idols? Tim Keller, in his book, *Counterfeit Gods*, says, "It is impossible to understand your heart or your culture if you do not discern the counterfeit gods that influence them." An idol can be defined as anything that takes the place of God in your heart, mind and life. Of course, none of us would ever openly say that anything has the place of God in our lives, so here's another way to think about idolatry: Idolatry is expecting God-results from non-God sources.

We exchange the glory of the immortal God for images of created things when we expect from anything less than God things which come from God alone.

So, do we sometimes find ourselves looking for God-results - salvation, security, comfort and peace - from things other than God? Yes, we do! Some look to science to answer all of our questions and secure a better future for us and the world. Some look to education to solve all of the world's problems. [By the way, the most advanced scientific community and the best educational system in the world in the 1930's was in Nazi Germany.] Others will look to the media, to popularity, to financial prosperity or to politics for the salvation and security we need.

### **c. Pursuing Wickedness**

Whatever idol we embrace in the place of God leads us into wickedness. The cause-and-effect relationship between idolatry and immorality is unmistakable:

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.

**For this reason** God gave them up to dishonorable passions." (vv. 22-26)

So, idolatry is the root and immorality is the fruit of man's rebellion against God. Every form of wickedness listed in verses 27-32 comes from the root cause of idolatry. Paul first highlights homosexual behavior in both female and male forms (vv. 26-27). Every kind of homosexual practice was fairly common and widespread in the Roman Empire, and Paul here is condemning all of it as contrary to nature. But he does not stop there. Homosexuality is the focus of just a verse and a half. Paul goes on to list a whole litany of other forms of wickedness, connecting them all to God-denying idolatry:

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. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 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. (vv. 28-32)

#### d. Wickedness as God's Wrath: "God gave them up"

But Paul does more than just say that all of these forms of wickedness come from the root cause of God-denial and God-replacement in idolatry. He states very clearly that the rise of wickedness in a culture is itself God's wrath against that culture.

God's active judgment against the ungodliness and unrighteousness of man is seen in three statements in verses 24, 26 & 28:

- *Therefore **God gave them up** in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves*
- *For this reason **God gave them up** to dishonorable passions.*
- *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.*

The cause-and-effect here is clear: The cause is idolatry and the effect is God giving people up – in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to dishonorable passions and to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

So, earlier we observed that idolatry is the root and immorality is the fruit of man's rebellion against God. But there is a key middle step in the progression from idolatry to immorality: Idolatry leads to out-of-control immorality because God gives us up in judgment and gives us over to enslavement by our lusts. In other words, because we don't want to be ruled by God, God gives us over to be ruled by our passions instead. He doesn't just give us what we want, He gives us over to what we want, and that should be terrifying!

## II. The Church's Calling (vv. 8-17)

Well, that's the bad news. Where's the good news? What can we do about this? To see what we should do, we have to back up from the darkness of verses 18-32 and go back to verses 8-17. Here we see Paul commending the church in Rome and reminding them of their core mission:

*First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world. <sup>9</sup> For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you <sup>10</sup> always in my prayers, asking that somehow by God's will I may now at last succeed in coming to you. <sup>11</sup> For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— <sup>12</sup> that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine. <sup>13</sup> I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles. <sup>14</sup> I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. <sup>15</sup> So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.*

*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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."*

### a. The Priority of Faith (vv. 8-12)

Notice what Paul says first: He thanks God for the Romans because their faith is proclaimed in all the world. It is the faith of the church – not its wealth, education, political connections, influence, prestige, power, size or anything else – that causes Paul to give thanks for them. And it is their faith that is proclaimed in all the world. The church in Rome had a worldwide reputation for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ!

Paul goes on to express his desire to come to Rome and be with them, that they may be mutually encouraged by one another's faith. Notice again the priority of faith. Their faith causes Paul to give thanks and when they see each other, they will be mutually encouraged by each other's faith.

### b. Our Obligation to All (v. 14-15)

Paul then expresses that part of the reason why he wants to come to them is that he is under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and the foolish. One of the things we learn from Paul's letters is that not only was the Roman Empire idolatrous, sexually immoral, rebellious and wicked, but it was also deeply divided into sub-groups who judged each other. The Jews and the Gentiles, the Greeks and the Barbarians, the educated and the uneducated, the slave and the free. Here Paul says he has an obligation to all.

The Gospel obligates us to all because everyone is made in God's image and Christ died for all categories of people. We are obligated to all those who bear the image of God and to all of those for whom Christ laid down His life – not just people from our group, who look like us and think like us, but all.

Among His twelve disciples, Jesus intentionally called Simon the Zealot and Matthew the Tax-Collector. The zealots were the Jewish nationalist party who hated the Romans, while Matthew was a tax-collector for the Romans. Then, Jesus took things a step further and called Saul – a violent Jewish Pharisee and persecutor of Christians to be His disciple and the apostle to the Gentiles, sending Paul to the unclean dogs he has been brought up to hate and resent.

### c. God's Power for All (vv. 16-17)

What could bring together such a mixed group of people from very different backgrounds into one church? Paul highlights it in verses 16-17. Consider the strong series of connections between verse 15 and 16 and then throughout verses 16-17:

*<sup>14</sup> I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. <sup>15</sup> So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.*

**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. **For** in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

Much human effort is spent in trying to establish some basis for our own righteousness. Group identity, which can manifest itself as nationalism or racism, is the attempt to establish a righteousness based on our own identity with a certain righteous group – the educated, the religious, the sophisticated, the common man, etc.

The Gospel denies all attempts at human self-righteousness, whether individualistic or group-based. In place of any righteousness of our own, the Gospel gives us God's own righteousness, received by faith alone from first-to-last. As the one source of true righteousness, the Gospel is thus the power of God for salvation for all who believe, whether Jew or Greek. For this reason, Paul is not ashamed of the Gospel but is eager to preach it to everyone – Jews and gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish - for the Gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes.

Paul has one mission, the Gospel. And he is under obligation to all to preach and share the Gospel with everyone, that they might receive the righteousness of God by faith in Jesus Christ, and that their faith would resound to the glory of God and the encouragement of other believers throughout the world.

### d. How Can We Fulfill Our Calling?

So, what do we do? Well, if we're concerned about the out-of-control immorality we see flourishing all around us in our culture and if we're concerned that this wickedness is the manifestation of the wrath of God against the God-denying, God-replacing idolatry of our culture, then we – like Paul – are under obligation. We who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and have come to receive the gift of God's righteousness by faith in Jesus through the Gospel are under obligation to all, all who bear God's image. We are under obligation to preach the Gospel to them. But we can't do that until we clean up our own house.

Peter says in 1 Peter 4:17 that "it is time for judgment to begin at the household of God." That means that we must repent of our idols before we can be used of God to rescue the world from theirs. We need to put

aside our idolatry before we can tell the world about the dangers of their idols and the salvation found in Jesus Christ. Our idols are many and each of us has different ones. Some of the biggest that we are tempted to worship include sports, entertainment, material goods and politics.

To examine your own heart and discern your own idols, ask yourself these questions:

1. What am I looking to for security, comfort, peace, joy, self-esteem?
2. What replaces God in my life?
  1. What keeps me from worshiping God, privately and publicly?
  2. Only 37% of practicing Christians read the Bible regularly. What keeps you from God's word? What has replaced God's word as my source of truth input on a daily basis?
  3. What keeps me from church attendance and involvement?

You could give many answers to these questions. John Calvin said that the mind of man is a factory of idols. But there is one very prevalent idol in contemporary American evangelicalism that keeps us from being able to see and fulfill our obligation to all, to preach the Gospel to all people: the idol of politics.

- Do we find it so much easier to talk with one another and with the world about politics than about Jesus?
- Do we find our emotional investment more firmly fixed on political outcomes than on our walk with Jesus?
- Do we check in on political sites and political news sites every day but often neglect reading our Bibles?
- Did we think that Tuesday's election was the source of either salvation or destruction for our culture?
- Do we find ourselves lashing out at people in anger because they disagree with us politically?
- Do we find ourselves angrily needing to protect, defend and advance our political views? (One of the interesting differences between idols and the true and living God is that we feel the need to defend our idols, while the true God defends His people.)

If we will not repent of our idolatry, we can be guaranteed of two things:

1. Our effectiveness in reaching our neighbors with the Gospel will continue to be greatly diminished.
2. God will break us of our idols, one way or another.

Sometimes the way God disciplines His own people is by giving them what they want so they can see how empty, lifeless and destructive it truly is.

Out of love for God and thankfulness for our salvation, out of a sense of our obligation to all and our call to preach the Gospel to all, we must repent of our idolatry. Leaving behind an idol is never easy, but it begins with the deep realization that what God offers us is truly better. In place of the idols that choke us and weigh us down, we can walk in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the full, unhindered joy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Will we?