

“They Exchanged the Truth of God for a Lie”

Sermons on Romans # 4

Texts: Romans 1:18-32; Psalm 19:1-14

There can be no good news of the gospel without the bad news of sin. Unless we realize the gravity of human sin and the helplessness of the human condition, we will never understand God’s grace to us in Jesus Christ. Beginning in Romans 1:18, and continuing all the way through Romans 3:20, Paul describes the condition of the human race after our fall into sin. When Paul is finished, the entire human race—Jew and Gentile—stands under God’s indictment.

We have already covered much of the first chapter of Romans, including the salutation (vv. 1-7), Paul’s personal remarks to the church in Rome, (vv. 8-15), and the thesis statement of the letter, found in verses 16-17. In these two verses Paul writes, *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’”* While there is every temptation to be ashamed of the gospel—since the gospel is foolishness to the Greek and a stumbling block to Jews—Paul is not ashamed, for he knows that the message of Christ crucified is the only means through which God freely offers a right standing to sinners, gives life, creates faith and delivers his people from that wrath coming upon the whole world.

As we now move into a new and rather lengthy section of Romans—running from Romans 1:18, all the way through to Romans 3:20. Here, Paul describes the gravity of the human condition. What he has to say is not good news. Paul will speak first to the Gentiles in Romans 1:18-32, before turning the spotlight of God’s law upon the Jews in Romans 2:1-3:8. And then, in verses 9-20 of Romans 3, Paul will shine that same spotlight on everyone (Jew and Gentile). By the time Paul is done, no one is left standing. There are none righteous and none who seek for God. Sin infects us from head to toe and through the law (which is holy, righteous and good), we become conscious of our sin.

This is one place where Paul’s rather grim assessment of human nature flies in the face of much of American culture and our democratic tradition. Paul sees people as sinful rebels, while Americans see people as basically good. Paul sees people as created in God’s image, explaining why human sinfulness is such a tragedy, while modern secular Americans see human beings as occupying the top rung of the evolutionary ladder, making people essentially no different from animals acting upon bodily urges and instincts. Paul sees the solution to the human problem in the cross of Jesus Christ, while ever-capable and prosperous Americans think Paul’s views on sin and salvation are nothing but a primitive myth to be discarded as a relic of the past. All of this is to say, what we find in this section of Romans, will confront us with our sins and guilt before God, while deeply offending many of our contemporaries. But without the knowledge of our true condition before a holy God, the cross of Jesus will make little sense. It will remain a scandal, a stumbling block and foolishness.

As we turn to the first part of our text, Romans 1:18-25, Paul describes the deep and abiding nature of unbelief. The reason why people do not believe in God, nor in the gospel, is simply because they don’t want to believe in God and the gospel. God has revealed himself to everyone through the created order, but people suppress the truth of God’s revelation in unrighteousness.

As I just mentioned, while verse 18 begins a new section of his epistle, in many ways this verse also

serves as an explanation of the final clause of verse 17, “*the righteous will live by faith.*” Notice the parallel between verse 17—“*in the gospel, a righteousness from God is being revealed*”—and what follows in verse 18: “*the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.*” In light of this direct parallel, a couple of things need to be said. For one thing, the fact that God’s wrath is presently being revealed against humanity’s sin (godlessness and wickedness), makes it abundantly clear that there is no way of having a righteous status before God except through the means of faith.¹ Indeed, unless we receive God’s gift of righteousness through faith, we are regarded by God as godless and wicked, and therefore, subject to his just judgment.

Furthermore, as in verse 17, in verse 18 the verb, Ἀποκαλύπτεται (“is being revealed”) is in the present tense, connecting this revelation of God’s wrath to the revelation of God’s righteousness in the gospel. While it is tempting to take Paul to mean by this, as many do, that God’s wrath is revealed through the natural disasters which take place upon the earth because of human wickedness and unrighteousness, this completely misses Paul’s point, which is that the revelation of God’s wrath comes from the same source as the revelation of righteousness—the preaching of the gospel. Whenever the cross is preached, we have the revelation of a righteousness from God, and the revelation of God’s wrath against human sin.²

Like nothing else, the cross bears witness to the fact that God must necessarily punish every infraction of his law. If sinners could be saved by any means other than the death of the sinless Son of God, surely God would have found some other way. That there is no other way is seen when God pours out his wrath upon his own Son, who dies in the place of his people. But the cross also reminds us that such wrath is also coming upon all those who refuse to exercise faith. Therefore, in the cross, the wrath of God upon human godlessness which will culminate in the final judgment, is even now being revealed. As Leon Morris reminds us, “unless there is something to be saved from, there is no point in talking about salvation.”³ The bad news must be before our eyes before the good news of the gospel makes any sense.

The very mention of God’s wrath (ὀργὴ θεοῦ—*orgay theou*) makes modern Americans extremely uncomfortable. To remove the offense, some commentators, (i.e. C. H. Dodd) have insisted that the wrath of God is merely a type of divine reciprocity principle; i.e., “what you sow, you will reap.” In other words, bad behavior will produce bad consequences. But most commentators correctly take Paul to mean that as God’s wrath is being revealed in the present, the revelation of this wrath points us ahead to the final revelation of God’s wrath on the day of judgment. As one writer puts it, “God’s judgments in history, then, anticipate the culmination of his wrath on the day of judgment.”⁴

But we must also be very clear that God’s anger against all the godlessness and wickedness of men and

¹ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.108.

² Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.110. Cf. Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 76-77; contra Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 99-102, who sees the revelation of wrath in eschatological terms, which, while a present reality is not connected to the cross, calling the view of Cranfield and Morris, who follow Barth, “provocative,” and; Schreiner, Romans, pp. 84-85, who locates this present revelation of the wrath of God in the moral decay of society.

³ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, 77.

⁴ Schreiner, Romans, p. 85.

women stems from the fact that God is holy and that he must punish all sin. God does not get angry in the same way in which sinful humans get angry. We get angry because we have bad tempers and don't get our way, because we didn't get enough sleep, because our blood sugar is low. God is angry at human sin because he is Holy. And the cross shows us what such holiness entails—God's wrath against sin both in the present and on the day of judgment.

It is also important to notice that there is a progression of sorts in Paul's argument. Godlessness leads to wickedness (literally "unrighteousness," the opposite of the righteous standing revealed in the gospel), and it is ultimately because people are without God that they commit acts of sin through which they suppress the truth.⁵ It is also instructive to note that these two categories, godlessness and wickedness also reflect the two tables of the law. Godlessness reflect sins against the first table of the law which defines our duty to God (commandments 1-4), while wickedness (unrighteousness) refers to sins against others, the so-called second table (commandments 5-10), which speak of our duties toward neighbor.⁶

We should also take note of the fact that the Greek word translated as "suppressing" (κατεχόντων *katexontone*) conveys the idea of "restraining" something or "holding [it] down."⁷ The present tense of the participle used by Paul indicates that suppression of truth is attempted, but is never completed.⁸ People unsuccessfully attempt to suppress God's truth because they are sinful and hate that which they know to be true. As John tells us, men love darkness rather than light, because their deeds are evil (John 3:19). This means that there is no such thing as an atheist, only someone attempting to suppress what they know to be true about God, but they don't want to believe. And it is this willful and culpable suppression of truth which is why God's wrath against all sin is being revealed, even now. Men and women know the truth, but, apart from the grace of God, they inevitably choose to reject God and his Christ, preferring instead to live in unrighteousness, sinning against God and neighbor.

The downward spiral of unbelief and the ever-increasing gravity of human rebellion, which results from suppressing the truth, are made plain by Paul in the balance of the chapter. In fact, three times, Paul speaks of God giving people over to the consequences of their sin, after they exchange his truth for a lie.⁹ This can be seen in verses 19-20, when Paul indicates that the reason why people do not believe in God and reject the gospel lies within them, not because God has not sufficiently revealed himself. "*Since*

⁵ John Murray argues that this clause is instrumental ("through unrighteous [acts] they suppress the truth"), not adverbial ("they suppress the truth unrighteously"). See Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 37; cf. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 102-103.

⁶ Moo, Epistle to the Romans, p. 102.

⁷ BAG; Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 36-37.

⁸ Cf. Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.112. Says Cranfield, "Sin is always an assault upon the truth (that is, the fundamental truth of God `as Creator, Judge, and Redeemer', which, because it is the truth, must be taken into account and come to terms with, if man is not to live in vain), the attempt to suppress it, bury it out of sight, obliterate it from the memory; but it is of the essence of sin that it can never be more than an attempt to suppress the truth, an attempt which is always bound in the end to prove futile."

⁹ Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 96.

what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”

Notice that there is specific content about God revealed in the created order which Paul will now define. Paul is not referring here to an innate knowledge of God with which men and women are born, but a knowledge of God which is acquired directly from contact with the created order. The fact that God makes this “known” and has, *since the creation of the world*, means that there is a constant revelation of God through the created order from the very beginning of time. This is what we speak of as general revelation, in contrast to special revelation, which refers to Holy Scripture.

But not only does God make himself known, this revelation “*is plain to them.*”¹⁰ That is, the revelation of God through nature is clear and accessible. This rules out an inward awareness of God, though Paul will argue for an innate knowledge of God in Romans 2:14-15. That this revelation is *clearly seen, being understood from what has been made*, indicates that Paul is referring to something outside of us, that is, to that which we observe in creation.¹¹ This means that one need not be a philosopher or a theologian to gain this knowledge. Anyone who has but the slightest contact with the world receives this revelation from God. They know God exists, because in this case, the whole of creation reveals that there is a God. God has made himself known, visibly, to all, *through* that which he has made. Therefore, the whole of creation reflects his own intrinsic glory as the creator of all things. Romans 1:19 ought to be understood as a loud echo from Psalm 19 (our Old Testament lesson this morning). The heavens do indeed declare the glory of God, and the earth does show forth God's handiwork.¹²

As if he wasn't clear enough, at the end of Romans 1:19, Paul once again emphatically states that God has made himself known to all men and women in the revelation of himself in nature: “*God has made it plain to them.*” This means that everyone can see and understand this revelation of God, because all men and women have been created in such a way as to be able to receive the revelation which God so graciously gives. And it is this knowledge of God derived from nature that sinful men and women attempt to suppress and exchange for lie through their unrighteous behavior. This is what Reformed theologians describe as “autonomy.” That is, we become a law unto ourselves and define truth, not in light of God's revelation, but from the reference point of human sinfulness.

In verse 20, Paul informs us that this revelation of God has a very specific content, God's “*invisible qualities.*” In creation we see God's eternal power, (αἰδῖος), while a second term, translated, “divine nature” (θεϊότης *theiotais*), is a specialized term which summarizes various divine attributes which constitute deity. Because there is a revelation of God's invisible attributes in creation, everyone living

¹⁰ This should be rendered “in their midst,” rather than “within them.” This revelation comes to them through the means of what has been made, not inwardly in the conscience. Cf. Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.113-114.

¹¹ Cranfield notes, καθορᾶται refers here to physical sight, cf. Commentary on Romans, I.114.

¹² Modern commentators overlook this echo (an allusion to an Old Testament text, without a direct quotation), although several of the church fathers (Ambrosiaster and Chrysostom) made the connection. See: Gerald Bray, ed., Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Vol. VI. Romans (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998), 35, 39.

knows that God is eternal, all-powerful, and possesses all the attributes of deity.¹³ As one writer reminds us, “in nature, we see nature’s God.”¹⁴

But the consequence of this suppression of the truth about God in unrighteousness now becomes clear. Paul states it empathically at the end of verse 20: *so that men are without excuse*. It is extremely important to remember that while everyone has a knowledge of God derived from nature, this knowledge in and of itself is not sufficient to save. But this knowledge of God is sufficient to condemn us. Indeed, that is the very purpose of God’s revelation of himself in creation, to leave everyone without excuse. This is why the missionary enterprise is so important. The gospel must be taken to all those who have not heard about the Savior because people cannot come to a saving knowledge of God apart from the message of the gospel, through which, God gives life, creates faith and reveals a right standing.

In verses 21-25, Paul now speaks of the next series of consequences which result from this ever-downward cycle of human sinfulness. Notice the pattern. People exchange God’s truth for a lie, and God turns them over to the consequences of their sins. Says Paul, “*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles. 24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. 25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*”

In these verses, Paul reiterates a number of the points he has already made, but now he fleshes out the further consequences of human sin and the suppression of God’s truth. In verse 21, Paul makes the point yet again, that all people know God. They are, therefore are without any excuse, whatsoever. Because of sin, people do not glorify God as they should, nor do they give him the praise and honor that is due him. And so, as Paul puts it, by suppressing what they know to be true, a non-Christian’s thinking inevitably becomes futile and their foolish hearts becomes increasingly darkened.¹⁵ By rejecting the creator, non-Christians will never fully understand the creation. This is why it is important not to miss Paul’s point when he speaks of the human heart, (*καρδία kardia*) as darkened. Paul is not referring to the muscle which pumps blood, but to the true inward self, a person’s true identity, since for a Greek-speaker, the heart was regarded as the seat of a person’s true disposition. This includes not just the emotions, but the intellect and will as well.¹⁶ Therefore, when the human heart is darkened, the entire person is darkened; intellectually, morally, spiritually, and emotionally. No part of human nature remains unaffected.

Given this darkened intellectual and moral condition, those who think themselves to be wise, actually demonstrate themselves to be fools. Such people exchange God’s glory for idolatrous images—*made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles*. Therefore, the suppression of the truth, which leads to intellectual futility, is inevitably followed by idolatry. Instead of worshiping the creator, people

¹³ Murray, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 39-40.

¹⁴ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 82.

¹⁵ Cf Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.118; Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, pp. 84-85.

¹⁶ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 85.

worship created things. This is why Calvin spoke of the mind of fallen man as an idol factory.¹⁷ Indeed, because men and women possess the true knowledge of God which betrays them at every turn, the only way to keep this knowledge from pushing them over the edge is to attempt to reject what they know or to re-channel God's truth into false religion. Many do their best to ignore what they know to be true and live in the complete inconsistency of unbelief. Many more re-fashion this knowledge of God into idols, often times the idol of a benign and kindly "god," who makes no moral demands upon them, or who makes moral demands that are easy to keep. Such a god looks a great deal like his creator.

It is this suppressed knowledge of God which also serves as the basis for all false religion, explaining why it is that people are so incurably religious and always prone to idolatry. While Paul clearly has paganism in view here, let us not overlook the fact that an idol is anything which we use to move the focus from the glory of the creator to ourselves. The glory of the eternal God can be directed to a creature, part of creation (i.e., sun or moon) a statue, a totem pole, or even a celebrity. But our favorite idol is ourselves, whom we worship, pamper and adore, because we suppress the knowledge of God to whom we should be giving the praise and glory due his holy name. As one writer reminds us, we cannot be saved from our sins through idolatry.¹⁸ Rather idolatry lies at the root of most all of human sin!

And so as a consequence of exchanging God's glory for idolatry, we read in verse 24, that *God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another*. God "giving people over" is a frightening phrase and Paul repeats it three times in the next few verses.¹⁹ This is a positive act of God in which he ceases to restrain human wickedness and allows it to run its course and to reach its ultimate depths.²⁰ Charles Hodge speaks of it this way. "It is a punishment for their apostasy that God gives men up to the scourge of sin....He withdraws from the wicked the restraints of his providence and grace, and gives them over to the dominion of sin....We see that sin follows sin as avenger."²¹ In this case, when God "gives over" those who have exchanged his glory for idolatry, the result is rampant sexual immorality resulting the degrading of our bodies, something typical of both ancient paganism²² and modern secularism. As Paul will make clear in the next few verses, the downward spiral of human sinfulness produces ever-greater levels of human depravity and perversion.

While this is all true, however, we need to be very careful here. To the English ear, the expression "God gave them over," has an eerie finality to it.²³ Paul means that human sin and idolatry have inevitable

¹⁷ Calvin, Institutes, I.xi.8.

¹⁸ Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 87.

¹⁹ The Greek word παρέδωκεν, (*paradidomai*) meaning "to give" or "to hand over."

²⁰ Cranfield writes, It "is surely so emphatic as to suggest that a positive act of God is meant. . . . We must think in terms of God's permitting (in the sense not of authorizing, but of not preventing), of his withholding his help which alone could prevent." See, Commentary on Romans, I.120-121.

²¹ Hodge, Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans, p. 40.

²² Morris, The Epistle to the Romans, p. 89.

²³ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.121.

consequences, in which God ceases his restraint upon the downward pull of human sin. But this does not mean that such people are beyond the reach of God's grace. This is why we must always keep in mind Paul's comments in I Corinthians 6:9-11: "*Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our Lord.*" Yes, we will reap the consequences of our actions. But God will save his elect, and transform them from idolaters into people who do give him the praise and thanks due to him alone. This certainly means that no one is too sinful, or too far gone to be rescued by God from their sins. In fact, just when it appears that God is giving up on someone, he is actually beginning to rescue them.

In verse 25, Paul summarizes the essence of human sinfulness, linking what has gone before with what will come after.²⁴ Despite the fact that God reveals his wrath against sin whenever the cross of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, and despite the fact that all people know God through God's revelation of himself through creation, "*They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.*" Here, Paul contrasts the truth of God with the lie—the futility of a life lived serving self instead of serving the creator. Again, the dishonesty of unbelief is in view here. Truth is exchanged for falsehood. "To serve" refers the idea of religious duties, performed in the various mystery religions with elaborate ceremonies and cultic rituals. Worship refers to religious practices and to acts of veneration as well as to inward feelings of reverence and awe that come from such false worship.²⁵ The point is that pagans exchange service and worship of the true God, for that which is false. They end-up in bondage to both their sin and to created things.

In verses 26-27, the ever-downward spiral of human behavior continues, as Paul describes the inevitable consequences of exchanging God's truth for a lie. God gives people over to even greater levels of depravity—and in this case, human sexuality becomes perverted.

Given the current view of homosexuality in American culture, in which homosexuality is portrayed as a kind of noble struggle against the victorian moralism of years gone by, even mentioning the subject in connection with the fact that God considers it a sin and a manifestation of human depravity, prompts many to avoid the topic altogether. Paul, however, addresses it head on. In verse 26, he writes: "*Because of this, (that is, because of the rejection of truth and the embracing of the lie), "God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. 27 In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion."* To argue that Paul is only condemning homosexual promiscuity, or homosexuality only as it is connected to paganism, but not homosexual acts *per se*, nor monogamous homosexual relationships, is utter nonsense. The issue here is that homosexual acts are both sinful and contrary to nature.

Like adultery (sex outside of marriage) or fornication (sex before marriage), all sexual sin is a sin against our own bodies, so that a certain measure of guilt and shame attaches to sexual sins, unlike other sins. Because human sexuality is one of God's greatest gifts and is of great benefit and pleasure to us when

²⁴ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.123.

²⁵ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.124.

exercised within the marriage covenant, it is extremely important that it not be abused. But when God's truth is rejected for a lie, human sexuality, especially when viewed through the lens of paganism, can become a cruel master that drives men and women to greater depths of depravity in order to satisfy its lusts. Such is the paradox of sin. In the attempt to satisfy our lusts, we commit the ultimate desecration of our bodies (cf. I Corinthians 6:18-20). But the consequences of the homosexual sins, described here by Paul, are that much greater than the consequences of fornication or adultery, since homosexual acts also violate the natural order and are the manifestation of the rejection of truth and the embrace of the lie, not just a sin of passion and weakness of the flesh.

In the context of Paul's argument here, homosexual acts are the consequence of the downward spiral of human sin and God giving people over to it. But while we need to be very clear about the fact that homosexual acts are sinful—and we must not let the culture tell us otherwise—we also need to be equally clear that homosexual acts are not unforgivable, nor are they listed by Paul as the bottom of the spiral of the human race into sin. Human depravity manifests itself in ever-darker ways, some which may seem innocuous to us, but are taken quite seriously by God.

In fact, in verses 28-32, the apostle's depiction of this downward spiral continues, a spiral reaching its low point in the approval of sinful acts on the part of those who know God's righteous ways, and who encourage sinful behavior in others in which they themselves do not engage.

In verses 28-32, Paul describes the final manifestation of human sin and the suppression of truth with a list of sins, illustrating the depths of the human depravity. Paul writes: *“Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. 29 They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; 31 they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”*

As we learn in verse 28, people who do not retain the knowledge of God, push aside what they know to be true and act in accordance with that which is false. This simply means that people reject God's perspective on things, because the knowledge of God inevitably interferes with the pursuit of pleasure, since that knowledge brings with it the conviction of sin. And one more time, we read of God giving people over to the consequences of rejecting the truth, this time to a depraved mind. This means that such a person's thinking is so debilitated and corrupted that the person's conscience is no longer useful as a moral compass.²⁶ Such people no longer have any moral direction and end up doing the very things which ought not to be done. Under these circumstances, all moral decisions are made from the perspective of the darkened heart and mind, because the knowledge of God is self-consciously rejected.

The specific sins which spring forth from this depraved mind are listed by Paul in verses 29-31. **Evil**; [*porniea*], which has a primary reference to sexual sins. **Wickedness**; [*adikia*], “unrighteousness,” the negation of righteousness. **Greed**; the insatiable desire to have more even at the expense of others. **Deceit**; indicating cunning and treachery. **Malice**; one who presents everything in the worst possible light. **Gossip**; literally, one who pours poison against his neighbor. **God-haters**; while hatred of God is

²⁶ Cranfield, *Commentary on Romans*, I.128.

descriptive of all those who have not trusted in Christ (cf. Romans 8:7), here the term used by Paul is intensified in meaning. **Insolent**; a term which contains a mixture of cruelty and pride. The proud insolence and contempt for others displays itself in cruelty for the mere enjoyment of seeing others suffer. **Arrogant**; the self-sufficient person who in his own heart sets himself upon a pedestal above others, even God. **Heartless**; literally without tenderness. It refers to the lack of the feelings of natural tenderness. “In this connection it refers to the Graeco-Roman practice of exposing unwanted babies and also of actual infanticide. Paul’s contemporary, Seneca, takes for granted the drowning of weak or deformed babies.”²⁷ According to Paul, people on this list invent ways of doing evil. They even disobey their parents, the prime symptom of the sinful propensity to disobey legitimate authority.

The purpose of this so-called “vice list” (there are others found in Paul’s writings) is to demonstrate that the Gentiles stand condemned before a Holy God. Indeed, who among us this morning can look around and say, “I’m not on that list.” No, we all are. But the absolute depth of human depravity is found in verse 32. The Gentiles know “*God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death.*” But do such people apart from the grace of God repent? No, says Paul, the bottom of the downward spiral is reached by those who “*not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.*” The one who does the evil, will feel the sting of their action. While the one who encourages the evil in others, so as to escape the sting themselves, is actually all the more culpable before God.²⁸

And with that, we have come to the bottom of the downward spiral. This is how God regards the Gentiles, those apart from God’s covenant line. I hope it is clear to every one, that Paul has not indicted only certain sins, and certain categories of people. Paul has indicted me. Paul has indicted you. We are all guilty before God. The verdict has just been delivered. The sentence has been pronounced. A day of wrath and judgment is certain to come. For God has revealed himself to us through that which has been made, but we do not thank him or worship him as we should. We have exchanged the truth for a lie.

No, the gospel doesn’t make sense to people who suppress the truth in unrighteousness and who have exchanged the truth for a lie. But for those who realize that the guilt and stain of sin covers us from head to toe, and that we have done everything on Paul’s list in our hearts, if not with our hands, and are guilty as charged, then the cross is the most blessed message we can hear. For on the cross, God announces to us that he has poured out his wrath upon our sins, placing them on Jesus Christ, who was punished for all the evil things we have done. And because God’s wrath has been poured out upon Christ, we will never face the wrath of God, which is revealed every time the gospel is preached. Jesus Christ bore that wrath for us, and in our place.

Let us pray . . .

²⁷ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.132-133.

²⁸ Cranfield, Commentary on Romans, I.135.