

Romans 1:18-25 "The Tragedy of Failing to Thank God" \*\*

Main Idea: In Romans 1:18-25 we discover that the failure to thank God, although often excused, is a great tragedy. Our text presents two critical points as to why the sin of ungratefulness is so serious and deserving of urgent attention.

I. Ungratefulness is a symptom of a bigger problem.

A. It all began with the sin of insubordination (18-20).

1. God's truth is good, but we resist it.
2. God's existence is certain, but we ignore it.

B. This led to the sin of ingratitude (21).

1. Thanksgiving is more than simply being thankful.
2. Thanksgiving involves expressing gratitude to the Giver of gifts.

C. This led to the sin of idolatry (22-23).

1. In the beginning, God created man.
2. Since the fall, man has tried to recreate God.

D. This led to the sin of immorality (24).

1. One way God judges people is to give them exactly what they want.
2. Though sex is a good gift from God, it brings severe consequences outside of marriage.

E. This led to the sin of insanity (25).

1. It's crazy to chuck the truth of God for the lies of men.
2. It's also crazy to live for created things rather than the Creator.

II. Ungratefulness is a signal that we need the gospel.

A. We need to come to grips with our sin (Rom. 1:18-3:20).

B. We need to come to grips with what God has done for sinners (Rom. 3:21-11:36).

1. On the cross Christ took the penalty for sin.
2. In Christ there is no condemnation.

C. We need to respond by giving God our thanks and our lives (12:1-2).

The Bottom Line: A sure way to stand out in this world is to thank God continually.

In 1777, while our country was at war for its independence, the Continental Congress issued a call for a day of thanksgiving, as it did several times. I'd like to read the first part of this particular proclamation:

“ FOR AS MUCH as it is the indispensable Duty of all Men to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God; to acknowledge with Gratitude their Obligation to him for Benefits received, and to implore such farther Blessings as they stand in Need of: And it having pleased him in his abundant Mercy, not only to continue to us the innumerable Bounties of his common Providence; but also to smile upon us in the Prosecution of a just and necessary War, for the Defense and Establishment of our unalienable Rights and Liberties; particularly in that he hath been pleased, in so great a Measure, to prosper the Means used for the Support of our Troops, and to crown our Arms with most signal success:

It is therefore recommended to the legislative or executive Powers of these UNITED STATES to set apart THURSDAY, the eighteenth Day of December next, for SOLEMN THANKSGIVING and PRAISE: That at one Time and with one Voice, the good People may express the grateful Feelings of their Hearts, and consecrate themselves to the Service of their Divine Benefactor; and that, together with their sincere Acknowledgments and Offerings, they may join the penitent Confession of their manifold Sins, whereby they had forfeited every Favor; and their humble and earnest Supplication that it may please GOD through the Merits of JESUS CHRIST, mercifully to forgive and blot them out of Remembrance...[\[1\]](#)

When I read that proclamation, the first thought that comes to my mind is, “We’ve come a long way.” The first leaders of this country made it a priority to thank God for His blessings, and not just a generic *God*, but *God through the merits of Jesus Christ*.

Ponder this question. Would you consider the failure to thank God a *tragedy*? I don’t think most people would. After all, you don’t get kicked out of school or thrown in jail for it. It’s not a “big sin,” not in the eyes of man anyway. You may be surprised to learn that God’s assessment is quite different.

In Romans 1:18-25 we discover that the failure to thank God, although often excused, is indeed a great tragedy. Why? Our text presents two critical points as to why the failure to thank God (let’s call it the sin of ungratefulness) is so serious and deserving of urgent attention.

### I. Ungratefulness is a symptom of a bigger problem.

The lack of thankfulness is an indicator, a revealer, a symptom of something. Its presence reveals that we’re in trouble. That’s what a symptom does. If I have a fever of 105 degrees, the fever isn’t really the problem but a symptom of it, an indicator that there’s some infection in my system.

The sin of ungratefulness is like that. When it’s present it reveals that a much bigger problem exists that deserves immediate attention.

Notice verse 21, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God *nor gave thanks to him*.” The failure to give thanks to God is a sin, but it’s also symptomatic of a much bigger problem. Verse 21 is part of a passage, one that began in verse 18 and runs through verse 32, and this passage is describing people that are under the wrath of God. Please realize that sin operates like a slippery slope. Being unthankful isn’t the first sin on the slope. To see where the drop began we need to go back to the beginning of this text and work our way through it, and in so doing we’ll discover five sins on the slope.

**A. It all began with the sin of insubordination (18-20).** Paul begins verse 18, “The wrath of

God is being revealed from heaven.” That’s an alarming statement. God is right now revealing His wrath. Against whom? “Against all the godlessness and wickedness of men.” And what is it that men are doing that prompts the loving Creator God to reveal His wrath against them? “Who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”

Listen to the description found in the KJV, “Against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.” There is man’s fundamental problem, and it has unleashed the wrath of God. We “hold” the truth. Let that sink in...

1. *God’s truth is good, but we resist it.* It started, of course, with Adam. He resisted the truth of God and brought the wrath of God upon the human race. But it’s not just Adam’s problem. We too try to bury, to obliterate, to suppress the truth.

How do we suppress the truth? Instead of accepting God’s truth, we run after two substitutes. Paul identifies them as “godlessness” and “wickedness.” Godlessness is sin against God. Wickedness is sin against God’s standards. Some have suggested that “godlessness” refers to violations of the first four of the Ten Commandments, and “wickedness” refers to violations of the final six commands.

Paul began the book of Romans by mentioning the glorious gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, five times in the first seventeen verses (verses 1, 9, 15, 16, and 17). He said he was set apart for it, preached it, wanted to come to Rome to preach it, and wasn’t ashamed of it no matter what the cost. But this good news isn’t good news until you grasp the bad news. The good news is that God offers salvation to everyone who believes in His Son. The bad news is the reason His Son came to the world in the first place. Although God’s truth is good, we resist it, and consequently are under His wrath.

But that’s not all. Our insubordination manifests itself in another way, for although...

2. *God’s existence is certain, but we ignore it.* That’s the point of verses 19-20, “...since what may be known about God is plain to them [to those who suppress the truth], because God has made it plain to them. 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.”

God is so kind. He created us to know Him, and even designed the created order itself to reveal what He’s like to us. The vast starry host teaches us that He’s powerful. The complexity of the tiny human cell communicates that He’s wise. And there’s not a person on the planet that doesn’t have access to this revelation, and consequently, there’s not a person on the planet that has an excuse for failing to believe in the Creator.

Several years ago, before my grandmother went to be with the Lord, I had an interesting conversation with her. She recalled an opportunity she had had more than sixty years prior, back around the year 1930. She was living in West Virginia. Though she was not herself a school teacher, the local public school invited her to come once a week and to teach the children. In the classroom. On school time. Do you know what the subject was? Bible stories.

Today we’re told that’s unconstitutional. How did that happen? It began with the sin of insubordination. God’s truth is good, but as a country we have resisted it. And God’s existence is certain, but we have chosen to ignore it.

Stuart Briscoe (41) tells the true story about the Polish astronomer Copernicus who lived many years ago. Copernicus studied the heavens. He came to the conclusion that that earth was not the center around which the universe revolved, but rather was itself a moving planet that revolved around the sun. Yet he was reluctant to publish his findings. Do you know why? He knew he would have a battle on his hands. The scholarly world of his day believed the earth was at the center of the universe. And as Briscoe observed, “Man has always felt that he is the center and everything revolves around him. To be told otherwise, whether by an astronomer or a theologian, has always presented man with extreme problems.”<sup>[2]</sup>

It began with the sin of insubordination, but it didn't end there...

**B. This led to the sin of ingratitude (21).** "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."

One of the first things a parent must teach a child to say is "thank you." That's because it's not natural for a little one to express appreciation for something, for as sinners we tend to think we deserve the good things we receive in life. Insubordination leads to ingratitude.

*For although they knew God.* Who is "they"? Paul is referring to those who are the reason that God's wrath is being revealed, to those who have been given ample revelation to know that God exists, but chose to reject Him and suppress His truth. Although they knew God, they responded in two unthinkable ways.

For starters, *they did not glorify Him as God.* It's possible to claim to believe in God and yet demean Him and dishonor Him. That's what sin is, the failure to glorify God. And that's what we've all done according to Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

*Nor gave thanks to Him.* It's not splitting hairs to point out that...

1. *Thanksgiving is more than simply being thankful.* It's more than appreciating food, family, health, freedom, and the rest of the good things we enjoy. It's not just an attitude, but an action, namely...

2. *Thanksgiving involves expressing gratitude to the Giver of gifts.* It's not enough to have a fuzzy feeling of appreciation, nor even to verbalize those feelings, "I really appreciate my health, my family, and so on." The question is, *Who* do you appreciate, and did you tell *Him*? Our text says that's what's missing. They did not *give thanks to Him*.

While working out at the Life Center one morning this week, I happened to hear the radio DJ talking about what lots of folks are talking about these days, the dismal economy. What caught my ear, however, was a flippant statement the DJ offered as he transitioned from the news to his next song. He stated (my paraphrase), "America will recover just like we always have, and the reason we will is because we the American people are strong!"

Is that why America has enjoyed a quality of life unrivaled in the history of the world, because our people are *strong*? Are we to be the object of our thanks? Hear again the indictment of the Scriptures: *For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.*

How does that happen? How does a nation go from expressing thanks to God...to taking credit for what God has done? Verse 21 tells us, "But their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." There is what happens when we fail to express our thanks to God. Our *thinking* becomes futile (we think we can spend money we don't have without consequences; we think that more stuff brings more fulfillment; that's *futile thinking*), and our *hearts* become darkened (your heart is your inner man, and includes your will, your emotions, your thinking, and your desires; it's like the control center at a factory; if the lights go out in the control center, you can be sure it will affect production; when people stop giving thanks, it's because they don't have any power in their control center, and consequently they're living in the dark).

Verse 21 drives a spike through the heart of the theory of evolution. Evolution says that mankind is getting better as time passes, that he is improving physically, intellectually, even morally. But this text says man is going backwards, for when man moves backwards he becomes less and less thankful. Like the cartoon, when Bart and his family gather around the table for supper, and Bart prays, "Dear God, Thanks for nothing."

The slippery slope began with the sin of insubordination. It led to the sin of ingratitude. Thirdly...

**C. This led to the sin of idolatry (22-23).** "Although they claimed to be wise [to whom? Apparently to each other.], they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles."

Statistics show that most people in our country believe in God. Yet all of us would have to admit that our morality has gone haywire. What's happened? People believe in God, but not the true God. Wiersbe explains, "Man is so constituted that he must worship something. If he will not worship the true God, he will worship a false god, even if he has to manufacture it himself!"<sup>[3]</sup>

It's not that Americans are irreligious. It's that we have redefined God, and we're not the first society to have done so. The fact is...

1. *In the beginning, God created man.* Yet...

2. *Since the fall, man has tried to recreate God.* Man seeks to make God more palatable to his tastes.

Do you know what the Bible calls a person who does that? Look again at verse 22, "They became *fools*." The Greek word for 'fool' is the word from which we get the term 'moron.' In the Bible, a fool is not somebody with a low IQ. Do you know how you can identify a fool? Not by what he knows, but by how he treats the Creator God in his life.

Remember what Jesus said about the rich man who built bigger barns in Luke 12:20?

"You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you." Why was he a fool? Because he lived life without the Creator God in mind.

Our text says they *exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images*. "Immortal" speaks of God's *otherness*, His transcendence. God is not mortal. You can't see Him or touch Him. His glory cannot be represented by man-created objects which is why the second commandment prohibited the making of idols. The Bible calls on us to believe in Him who is invisible (Heb. 11:1), and says that without faith it is impossible to please Him (Heb. 11:6).

But man doesn't want to believe in the invisible Creator God. He wants to believe in something he can see, something he himself has *made*, and so he makes images of God that look like himself, like birds, like animals (lit. 'four-footed beasts'), and reptiles.

Did you ever think about the effect the theory of evolution has had on modern society? Evolution says that human life came from lower life forms, from four-footed creatures, from a *beast*. Today we defend the beast, we credit our origin to the beast, and the book of Revelation says that when the end of the world comes mankind will actually worship the beast.

As Everett Harrison points out, "According to the prophetic word, the worship of man and beast will merge during the tribulation period."<sup>[4]</sup> What image do we find ruling the world in the book of Revelation? The *beast*. Think about this charge in Revelation 13:18, "If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the *beast*, for it is *man's* number. His number is 666."

Yet the slippery slope continues. Insubordination leads to ingratitude, and ingratitude leads to idolatry. What's the result of idolatry?

**D. This led to the sin of immorality (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."

*God gave them over.* What an alarming statement (one that appears again in verse 26 and verse 28)! Harry Ironside summed it up years ago, "Because men gave God up He gave them up."<sup>[5]</sup> And remember, verse 18 says that this whole slippery slide in Romans 1 is a manifestation of God's wrath. In this case, God didn't reveal His wrath by sending fire from heaven (that will come in the future). God revealed His wrath by letting sinful men go exactly where they wanted to go, down the trail of lust. And

along with the right to choose, God also gave mankind the freedom to live with the consequences of that choice. It's true, my friend...

1. *One way God judges people is to give them exactly what they want.*

People get upset about the fact that God doesn't take everyone to live with Him in heaven. "What a cruel God!" they say. But He's not cruel. Heaven is *all about Him*. In heaven God's creatures are praising Him, serving Him, cherishing Him, adoring Him, and bringing honor to Him. If a person didn't want those things on earth, he certainly would feel out of place in heaven.

Please realize that one of the ways God judges people is to give them exactly what they want. In a sense, that's what hell is. For people who in this life have said, "I don't want You ruling my life, Lord Jesus," the Lord says, "Okay, then you may have what you wish, an eternity of existence without Me."

But what specifically did God give insubordinate, ungrateful, and idolatrous sinners over to? Verse 24 says He gave them over *to sexual impurity* in which people *degrade their bodies with each other*. It's true...

2. *Though sex is a good gift from God, it brings severe consequences outside of marriage.*

And sex is a good gift from God that He intends a man and a woman to serve each other with inside the marriage relationship, and when they do there's great satisfaction. But that's not the case with sex before marriage or outside of marriage.

Not long ago Sherry came home from work and told me about a conversation she overheard in the high school library. A couple of high school girls were talking about another girl who had shared that she had *not* had sex on her recent date, and they were befuddled. They couldn't fathom having date and *not* having sex. That's what a date is for, isn't it, to have sex?

Young people (but not just young people, for these days even folks into their senior years of life are in trouble), don't buy the lie about the "freedom of sexual expression." Sex before or outside of marriage is both empty and consequential. The song may say, "Come on baby, I want to love you all night," but what the guy or gal means is, "I want to use you tonight to gratify my passions, and then I'll probably be looking for somebody else tomorrow."

Please don't miss the connection. Sexual perversion is the consequence of insubordination, ingratitude, and idolatry. Gross immorality grips a people when that people reject the true God and set up substitute gods in His place.

Stuart Briscoe points out, "The article on 'Idolatry' in the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* lists some of the better-known gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon: Ishtar, goddess of love; Nabu, the patron of science and learning; Nergal, the god of war and hunting." Then Briscoe draws this stinging indictment, "Today we sit in Ishtar Cinema, study in Nabu University, and yell our heads off in Nergal's Stadium—modern places and attitudes of worship."<sup>[6]</sup>

We're trying to get a handle on the big problem, of which ungratefulness is but a symptom. It began with insubordination. Then insubordination led to ingratitude, ingratitude to idolatry, and idolatry to immorality. And where did that take us?

**E. This led to the sin of insanity (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." Do you know what's crazy? Two things, according to this verse...

1. *It's crazy to chuck the truth of God for the lies of men.*

2. *It's also crazy to live for created things rather than the Creator.*

To reiterate, that's exactly what we've done with sex in our nation. Sex is a gift from the Creator to His

creation. There was no embarrassment about the subject prior to sin. God designed a husband and wife to enjoy this gift for both pleasure and procreation.

But freedom is found *within* boundaries, not by chucking boundaries in unrestrained living. The sitcoms on TV want you to think that sensuality leads to freedom. It doesn't. Sensuality leads to bondage.

Let me illustrate. Suppose I decided I didn't like stop signs, since they cramp my style. And suppose I decided to repaint each stop sign "Go." That would be exchanging the truth for a lie. What's the problem? First, I don't have the authority to change the laws. I am not the law-giver. Second, there are serious consequences for ignoring and tampering with laws (like car wrecks, and jail time!).

That's what the world did. Mankind exchanged the truth of God for a lie (25), literally, for "*the* lie." From the garden of Eden to this day, the devil's tactics remain the same. He entices us with THE lie. He says, "God doesn't know what's best. You do. You know what will make you happy." Once we buy that lie, the next step follows naturally. Mankind, as verse 25 declares, "worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator."

Last week at the pet store I saw a hamster that reminded me of Mickey, a pet hamster that lived in our house a few years back. Quite frankly, Mickey had it made. All he did was eat, sleep, and play, within the safe confines of his cage. But suppose he had said, "My master is a kill-joy. He locked me up inside this stuffy cage. He won't let me have any fun. I want to be free! I want to get out and do my own thing in the real world!" Do you know how long he would have lasted in the "real" world? Five minutes, until our cat got him. Those boundaries were for his own good, whether he realized it or not.

Allow me to speak pointedly. Some of you have been thinking, "My marriage is cramping my style. My spouse is a bore. I want out. I want to be free." Listen, running from a relationship doesn't result in freedom, but in bondage. God set up a good boundary in His Word, "One man, one woman, till death do us part."

I think of a man who was married for 27 years. He chucked that marriage for the freedom of a younger woman. The result? Some momentary, sensual pleasure, and a whole lot of eternal heartache.

Yes, failing to thank God is a tragedy, for it's a *symptom* of a much bigger problem. It's also a *signal*, and that brings us to our second point.

## II. Ungratefulness is a signal that we need the gospel.

That's what Romans is, a call to embrace the gospel. Romans 1:16-17 "I am not ashamed of the *gospel*, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes... For in the *gospel* a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith..." As we walk through the book of Romans we discover that we have three needs...

**A. We need to come to grips with our sin (Rom. 1:18-3:20).** That's what Romans 1:18-3:20 is all about, to show us that we are sinners. We are *all* sinners who have missed the mark and deserve God's wrath.

Some Christians seem to delight in talking about how bad the world is. They speak of the wrath of God with a sort of glee. For a case in point, take the story of John Paulk, as told in Joe Stowell's recent book *Loving Those We'd Rather Hate*. In 1986, John Paulk rode in a Gay Pride parade in downtown Columbus, Ohio. He was a well-known female impersonator. A man yelled, "Candi, we love you! You're the most gorgeous drag queen in Columbus!" John smiled and waved.

Then the motorcade came to another group. This small crowd yelled and jeered at John, waving their Bibles over their heads. They held signs that read, "God Hates Fags," and "Turn or Burn."

The irony is that six months after that parade, John met Jesus Christ. While at the print shop where

he worked, John met a different kind of Christian. One day that Christian invited John over to his house. John listened to the gospel. And that night, they prayed together, as John committed his life to Christ. Today John and his wife Anne live in Portland, Oregon where he is preparing for a career in Christian counseling.<sup>[7]</sup>

You may be thinking, "A homosexual doesn't deserve to be saved. He deserves the wrath of God." May I ask you two questions? One, which of us deserves to be saved? And two, which of us doesn't deserve the wrath of God?

Romans says that we—that's all of us—need to come to grips with our sin. Then...

**B. We need to come to grips with what God has done for sinners (Rom. 3:21-11:36).** That's what Romans 3:21 through 11:36 is all about. It's there we learn that...

1. *On the cross Christ took the penalty for sin.* And...

2. *In Christ there is no condemnation.* I'm so thankful that Romans 3:23 ends in a comma. Take a look, for it says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,"—see that comma? What's true of sinners who have fallen short of God's glory? Verse 24 tells us, "And are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."

There's what God has done for sinners. Through the work His Son accomplished by dying on a cross and then rising from the dead, God *justifies* a sinner (that means He declares that sinner to be righteous in His sight), and He does it *freely* and *by His grace*. That brings us to our third need...

**C. We need to respond by giving God our thanks and our lives (12:1-2).** That's the response called for in Romans 12:1, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices." In view of what God has done for us in Christ, in view of His mercy, the fitting response is to give God our thanks, yes, and our very lives. And the final chapters of Romans show us how to do just that in practical terms.

Here's the bottom line truth, my friends. *A sure way to stand out in this world is to thank God continually.* Indeed, if we've come to know Christ, it's unthinkable *not* to express our thanks. That's why Charles Wesley penned the hymn we're going to sing momentarily, for he understand that our great God deserves more than just *one* tongue singing His praise. Wesley asked for a thousand tongues, knowing that's still not enough! May this be our heart's cry!

*O for a thousand tongues to sing  
My great Redeemer's praise,  
The glories of my God and King,  
The triumphs of His grace!*

*My gracious Master and my God,  
Assist me to proclaim,  
To spread through all the earth abroad  
The honors of Thy name.*

*Jesus! the name that charms our fears,  
That bids our sorrows cease;  
'Tis music in the sinner's ears,  
'Tis life, and health, and peace.*

*He breaks the power of canceled sin,  
He sets the prisoner free;  
His blood can make the foulest clean,  
His blood availed for me.*

*He speaks, and, listening to His voice,  
New life the dead receive,  
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice,  
The humble poor believe.*

*Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb,  
Your loosened tongues employ;  
Ye blind, behold your Savior come,  
And leap, ye lame, for joy.*

*Glory to God, and praise and love  
Be ever, ever given,  
By saints below and saints above,  
The church in earth and heaven.*

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**\*\*Note:** This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

[1] Taken from Wikipedia; [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving\\_\(United\\_States\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thanksgiving_(United_States))

[2] Story told by Stuart Briscoe, *Romans*, p. 41.

[3] Warren Wiersbe, p. 518.

[4] Everett Harrison, p. 24.

[5] Harry Ironside, p. 31.

[6] Stuart Briscoe, p. 47.

[7] Joe Stowell, *Loving Those We'd Rather Hate*, pp. 5, 18, 19.