

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 6/12/94  
Romans 1:18-23 "What in the World is Going On?"

**Intro:** Last week, Sherry and I had the opportunity to spend some time with my grandparents. They are in their late eighties. They have had a wealth of experiences in their lives. I was thinking how much the world has changed within the short span of their lifetime, so I said to them, "It must be staggering for you to think about the changes that have occurred in your lifetime. Could you have dreamed when you were little what life would be like in the 1990's?" Grandpa Howard remarked, "No way. I can recall pulling farm equipment with horses!" Grandma mentioned life before the electric iron. In their lifetime, in the past 8 decades, they have seen more change than our ancestors saw in the previous 8 centuries combined.

We talked about the technological changes. They've ridden to church in the back of a horse-drawn wagon, and in the plush seats of an airconditioned automobile. They've been through wars like WWI where you didn't find out for weeks, until the telegram came, whether your loved one in the army died in France; and they've witnessed Desert Storm with its instant "You are There" TV broadcasts. They've gone from childhood days when it was a big thing to take a trip to the next county, to watching a man travel 180,000 miles and take a walk on the moon.

When you think about all the changes, it's breathtaking. But the changes are more than technological. We've also seen some staggering moral changes. You don't need me to elaborate on these.

One illustration is sufficient. In that same conversation, my grandmother recalled an opportunity she had some 60+ years ago, 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 that's considered unconstitutional.

What in the world is going on? Christians wrestle with that question. So do non-Christians. That's the very question God's Word answers in Romans 1:18-32. When you read the latter half of Romans 1, it's like reading the front page of the newspaper. Though written 19 centuries ago by the apostle Paul, directed by the Holy Spirit, its message is contemporary. What in the world is going on? The Bible tells us.

**Proposition: Romans 1:18-23 reveals two important perspectives for us as we wrestle with the question, "What in the world is going on?"**

- I. What has God been doing? (18a)
  - A. He has revealed His righteousness (17).
  - B. He has revealed His Wrath (18).
- II. What has Mankind been doing? (18b-23)

Three reasons we deserve God's wrath...

  - A. We suppress the truth of God (18-20).
    1. We are not without evidence.
    2. We are without excuse.
  - B. We ignore the Person of God (21).

C. We pervert the Glory of God (22-23).

### **I. First Perspective: What has God been doing? (18a)**

READ vv 16-18 "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ..."

The book of Romans is a treatise on the subject of the gospel of God. In it, Paul maps out the message he preached. Last week we learned what our responsibilities are to the gospel. We must understand the gospel--it is God's News. We must unleash the gospel--it is God's power. And we must unveil the gospel--it is God's revelation.

What has God been doing in the world? What did He do 4,000 years ago when He chose Abraham, and promised to bless his descendants? What did He do 3,000 years ago when He affirmed the Messianic line through King David? What did God do 2,000 years ago when He sent His beloved Son to the cross? And what is He doing today? The answer is that He is revealing something.

What has God revealed in the gospel? Two things, the first in verse 17.

#### A. He has revealed His righteousness (17).

Vv 16-17 are the theme verses for the epistle. The gospel is about the grand theme known as the "righteousness of God." The word occurs 92 times in the New Testament, and 36 times in Romans (McGee, 33). The root word simply means "right." To be righteous means to be right.

Our problem is that by birth we are not righteous. We are not right. We are sinners. We are not right with God. We are alienated from Him. But the gospel reveals how people who are not right with God can be made right with God. How? How are we made righteous? Not by working for it, but solely through faith in Jesus Christ.

I have before me a tragic picture. It is a photograph of a Filipino man. He is burdened by his guilt for his sins. Because of that guilt, he is crawling on his knees. It's Good Friday. And the man is whipping his bare back with a scourge, trying to save himself. He's trying to make himself right with God. But he can't.

How do I know that? Because God has revealed that righteousness is available to that man, and to us, only by faith in Christ, not by our works (Tit 3:5). In the gospel, God has revealed His righteousness.

Now don't miss the next step. God has revealed something else in the gospel.

#### B. He has revealed His Wrath (18).

Notice the same word from v 17 repeated in v 18, "For the wrath of God is revealed." In the gospel, God has revealed His righteousness. He had also revealed His wrath.

Beginning in 1:18 all the way to 3:20, Paul shows us why mankind needs God's righteousness. Due to sin. It's because of sin that the world is under the wrath of God.

What is the wrath of God? You say, "It's the judgment God will pour out on the world in the future, in the tribulation, isn't it?" Yes, look at Rom 2:5-6, "But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of

wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds." The wrath of God will be revealed in the future.

But wait. Rom 1:18 isn't talking about future wrath. Did you realize that God has already revealed His wrath in the past, and is revealing His wrath in the present? Notice the tense in 1:18, "The wrath of God is revealed." The word means "to uncover." It's the greek word "apokalupto" from which we get our english word "apokalypse." God's wrath is revealed.

Every time the gospel is preached, God's wrath is revealed. Don't buy that heretical distinction that the God of the OT is a God of wrath, but the God of the NT is a God of love. The God of the NT reveals both His wrath and His love. It was because of both His wrath and His love that Christ went to the cross.

To us, wrath is a bad virtue. A person who exhibits wrath is out of control, burning with fiery anger. But God's wrath is not like that. The wrath of God is part of the righteousness of God. As Stuart Briscoe writes (39-40), "God's wrath is 'right': it is a holy response to the unholy, a just reaction to the unjust, a pure rejection of the impure. In fact, for God not to express wrath at much of what goes on in our world would be wrong." In the gospel, God has revealed His righteousness, and His wrath.

Caution: 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 printshop 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 (pp. 5, 18, 19).

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?

We all deserve the wrath of God. Take a close look at v 18, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against ALL ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." The reason Paul talks about wrath is so we'll appreciate the greatness of the gospel.

Tran: What in the world is going on? We've seen what God is doing. He has revealed His righteousness, and His wrath. Why has God revealed His wrath?

## **II. Second Perspective: What has Mankind been doing? (18b-23)**

Never forget this. God never condemns, and God never exhibits His wrath without just cause (BKC). There are three reasons we deserve God's wrath.

### A. We suppress the truth of God (18-20).

Listen to the description. "Against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness." There it is. We "hold" the truth. The problem of mankind is that we try to bury the truth, to obliterate it, to suppress it.

How do we suppress the truth? Instead of accepting God's truth, we run after two substitutes. Paul identifies them as "ungodliness" and "unrighteousness." Ungodliness is sin against God. Unrighteousness is sin against God's standards. Some have suggested that "ungodliness" refers to violations of the first 4 of the Ten Commandments, and "unrighteousness" refers to violations of the final 6 commands.

There's the first reason we deserve God's wrath. We suppress the truth. Just like Pilate did, when he said, "What is truth?" And the answer was standing right before him. Right here is a major problem with our world. "Men hold the truth in unrighteousness." We suppress the truth about God. We suppress the truth about ourselves. We suppress the truth about the family.

Objection: "Maybe we need more evidence. If we give lost men the facts they'll believe the truth, won't they?" Paul disproves this in v 19, by going back in history, and pointing out that we are not without evidence.

#### *1. We are not without evidence.*

V 19 "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God has shown it unto them." God has given the world evidence that points to Him. Theologians call this Natural (or General) revelation. Paul elaborates in v 20.

V 20 "For the invisible things of Him from the creation of the world are clearly seen." There's an ironic statement. The invisible is clearly visible! The marvelous universe we live in tells us two things about God. One, God's creation reveals His power. And two, it reveals His "Godhead" (His Deity).

Why then do men suppress the truth? Why do people persist in living under the wrath of God? It's not that we lack evidence. Check out: Psalm 19:1-6

The evidence is there, my friend. And so is the following conclusion.

#### *2. We are without excuse.*

V 20 "So that they are without excuse." The Phillips Modern English Bible paraphrases this graphically, "thus leaving these men without a rag of excuse."

You say, "What about my neighbor. He's never been to church. He doesn't know the truth. What is his condition?" If he doesn't have Christ, he doesn't have the righteousness of God, and is under the wrath of God. "Well, what about the 'innocent' native in the dark regions of the Congo who has never heard the gospel? Is he without excuse?" That's a tough one, but as we look at the text we must affirm 4 truths.

One, we all have access to the knowledge of God (19). Two, we all suppress that knowledge (18, 21 There is no such thing as an "innocent" person). Three, we are all without excuse (20). And four, we deserve the wrath of God--all of us.

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."

There's a second reason we deserve the wrath of God.

#### B. We ignore the Person of God (21).

Are you appalled by the degradation of sin in our world? What was unthinkable behavior 20 years ago is commonplace today. Did you ever wonder where perversion came from? Here's the answer. It comes from wrong ideas about God (Bruce. 82).

V 21 "Because when they knew God, they glorified him not as God." Bad theology leads to bad morality. Flipant thoughts about God lead to flipant lifestyles.

V 21 drives a spike through the heart of the theory of evolution. Evolution says that man is getting better as time passes, that he is improving physically, intellectually, even morally. But the text says man is going backward.

Notice four downward steps that have occurred since the Garden of Eden. One, though man used to know God, he refused to glorify God. To glorify means to make weighty, to honor. Mankind stopped glorifying God.

Step two, he stopped being thankful. Isn't that interesting? God condemns unthankfulness. I wonder what He thinks about our nation. We are so blessed. But are we thankful? Ingratitude is one of the worst sins there is (McGee, 38). You remember when Jesus healed 10 lepers? How many came back to thank Him? Only one. When mankind moves backward, 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."

Step three, people became vain in their imaginations. Fallen man's thinking has become futile. Don't miss this. The fall of man into sin affects behavior, yes, but it also has damaged man's intellect. We have a "reprobate mind" (28). And step four is related. Their foolish heart was darkened.

Mankind has moved away from God. Wrong thoughts about God led to wrong values which have led to wrong behavior.

Application: Don't play games with God's truth. Jesus constantly warned His hearers, "Take heed how you hear." When you hear God's Word, don't hear it merely academically. Hear it with a heart to get to know the Person of God better. Hear it with the resolve that you will obey it. If you don't, the truth will harden you. The same sun that melts the butter, hardens the clay.

Why do we deserve God's wrath? First, because we have suppressed the truth of God. Second, because we have ignored the Person of God.

#### C. We pervert the Glory of God (22-23).

Vv 22-23 "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man."

The statistics show that most people in America 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 God of the Bible.

Wiersbe made an interesting observation (518), "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!"

It's not that Americans are irreligious. It's not that we forget God. It's that we redefine God. In the beginning, God created man. Every since, man has tried to recreate God, to make Him more palatable.

Do you know what the Bible calls a person who does that? V 22 "they became FOOLS." The greek word is the word from which we get "moron." In the Bible, a fool is not somebody with a low IQ. Do you know who you can tell a fool? Not by what he knows, but by how he lives.

If God does not make a difference in my life, I am a fool. Remember what Jesus said about the rich man who built bigger barns in Lk 12:20, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee." Why was he a fool? Because he lived without God.

There are serious consequences for trying to live without God. Always. When we suppress the truth of God, and ignore the Person of God, and pervert the glory of God, we experience the wrath of God. Breaking laws results in suffering.

We know this in other areas (Barclay, 27). If you break the laws of architecture, your building collapses. If you break the laws of health, your body falls apart. Ours is a fundamental problem. Instead of living for our Creator, we live for the creation. Instead of loving our Maker, we love the things our hands have made. And we are without excuse.

### **Conclusion:**

What's going on in the world? Mankind is under the wrath of God. The reasons are clear. Mankind has suppressed the truth of God. Mankind has ignored the Person of God. And mankind has perverted the Glory of God.

Let me ask you something. Did mankind catch God off guard? Is God in heaven wringing His hands, wondering what went wrong? Or is He standing idly by, waiting, wishing, hoping things will take a change for the better? No, beloved. No.

God is sovereign and holy. Do you know what He has done with mankind? The key phrase that answers that question appears three times in the following verses (24, 26, 28). What has God done with a world that turned from Him? V 24, "Wherefore, God also gave them up." What does that mean? We'll see, next week.

Challenge: This morning we've pondered that plaguing question, "What in the world is going on?" We've seen what God has been doing. We've seen what Mankind has been doing. I want to ask you.

What have YOU been doing? God has revealed both His righteousness, and His wrath. Are you clothed in His righteousness, or are you under His wrath? Have you trusted Christ and become a child of God, or have you rejected Christ and placed yourself under the judgment of God? Those are the two options.