

In Romans 1:16-17 Paul introduced what is considered by many to be the thematic passage in the epistle. Certainly, given that the theme of Romans is the *gospel*, these two verses are crucial to the development of Paul's argument. This may be shown from several perspectives:

- The first is that they provide the point of transition from Paul's introduction into the doctrinal section of the epistle.
- Second, they reveal the centrality of the gospel to Paul's desire and intention concerning his personal ministry to the Romans. He believed that the preaching of the gospel was as vital for their growth in sanctification as it was for their initial conversion.
- But most importantly, these verses provide Paul's introduction to the doctrine that is the very marrow of the gospel, namely *justification by faith*. His eagerness to come to Rome and minister the gospel was compelled by the fact that the gospel is the power of God. And the reason this is so is that in the gospel God's own righteousness is revealed, interpreted, and appropriated by lost and hopeless men. It reveals that men are justified and saved, not by anything found in or proceeding out of them, but strictly by God's mercy and good pleasure in cleansing them and giving to them His own impeccable righteousness which they receive by faith. Salvation is gained by those who entrust themselves to the power and provision of God in Jesus Christ. Thus the power of the gospel is due to its radical *theocentricity*; the power of the gospel lies in the fact that it is the power of *God*.

Ironically, this very quality in the gospel is what makes it so disagreeable to men. What ought to be precious to them and a matter of profound gratitude is despised. But the reason is not that men want nothing to do with God, much less that they have no conception of Him; men reject the gospel because it stands opposed to the very fabric of their fallen humanity. That is, the temptation presented to the first man and woman was the enticement of a form of *equality* with God; specifically, the right to think, judge, and act as autonomous moral agents. Their desire was not the elimination of God or even the cessation of their personal association with Him; *what they sought was the right and capacity as image-bearers to operate on a par with Him*. This is the clear and resounding message of the Genesis account.

The prerogative and power of self-determination that allured Adam and Eve and became their downfall continue to plague all of their offspring to this day. But because these fallen men are the objects of the gospel message, the Christian needs to properly understand who he is dealing with and the nature of man's fundamental problem. It is absolutely crucial to understand that the depraving of man's nature as a result of the Fall cannot be defined in terms of atheism, ungodliness, immorality, or lawlessness *per se*; *all of these are symptoms that can readily be rectified by human effort*. Human depravity is far worse because it is innate and irremediable - it is man looking at every aspect of reality through the lens of his own self-originating and self-oriented perspective. *Depravity is the inescapable condition of self as the point of reference in all things*.

Because this depravity is fundamental, overarching, and comprehensive, it is the defining principle of human existence and, therefore, extends as fully to *religious* matters as non-religious. One need only consider the myriad expressions of human religion to substantiate this fact. For, though man's religious beliefs and exercises are characterized by countless nuances of doctrine and expression, *they are all the same in one important respect: they all place man in the position of self-determination*. Whether a given religion teaches that man effectively *is* god (Eastern religions), is *becoming* god (Mormonism), or is able to *obtain the favor* of his god through his own efforts, either entirely or in part (Judaism, Islam, Catholicism, and various cults), the premise and result are the same: man is the point of reference and ultimate determining factor in his spiritual well-being, however that well-being may be conceived.

As a man steeped in the strict moralism of the Pharisaical tradition, Paul understood this all too well, and it is for that reason that, after introducing in germinal form the doctrine of justification by faith, he turned aside to the matter of *man* (1:18-3:20). For by showing to the Romans the perversion, pervasiveness, and intractability of human self-determination and the wrath it incurs, he could cement in their minds the absolute necessity - as well as the beauty, excellence, and preciousness - of God's righteousness appropriated by faith. And precisely because a proper conception of man, both in his created nature and his fallen state, is so crucial to Paul's gospel, it was necessary to lay the foundation of Genesis 1-3 before advancing in the Roman epistle. For only when the nature and purpose of man as *image-bearer* are understood can the calamity of sin be biblically conceived. A correct view of sin, in turn, is absolutely necessary for interacting with Paul's argumentation in the following section of Romans

This larger section that spans 1:18-3:20 has been titled, *The Problem of Sin*, and is broken down into two sub-sections addressing first the *nature and culpability* of sin and then its *universality*. The former section addresses man's condition and consequent estrangement from God in more general, *anthropological* categories, whereas the latter is concerned with showing that the Jews who have the Law and all the covenant privilege that go with it are in exactly the same predicament as the Gentiles. This is a crucial observation for Paul to make, for it proves that the most privileged status - not to mention meticulous conformity to legal prescription - is useless in bringing human remediation and favor with God. The only hope for *all* men is the obtainment of God's own righteousness, which, by God's design and to the praise of His glory, can only be gained by faith.

1. Its Nature and Culpability (1:18-32)

Paul transitions into this section with a contextually significant conjunction, *for*. In the previous two verses he declared his absolute confidence in the gospel as the power of God, further indicating that its power lies in its disclosure and offer of the righteousness of God and its call to men to appropriate it by faith. Now, beginning with 1:18, he shifted emphasis from God's *righteousness* to God's *wrath*. This transition in content is important to recognize, for it provides insight into how the transitional conjunction is to be understood. In general terms, the conjunction *for* is inferential, usually introducing the reason for what has just been said or an explanation or clarification of it.

In the present context all three aspects of meaning can be found, and Paul's point appears to be that verses 1:18-3:20 provide the reason - and, in that sense, the explanation - for his insistence upon the absolute uniqueness and necessity of the gospel and righteousness by faith in matters pertaining to man's relationship with God.

- a. The first thing to note about Paul's transition into this next section is that it begins with his declaration that God has given to men *two revelations*: the first is the revelation of *His righteousness* in the gospel; the second is the revelation of His wrath against the *unrighteousness of men*. The former is the revelation of salvation and life; the latter the revelation of condemnation and death. Also, because the same verb "*is revealed*" occurs in both instances in the same tense, the wrath of which Paul spoke cannot be assigned to the final judgment at the end of the age and the indignation of hell. As the gospel is even now, in the "fullness of the times" revealing God's righteousness, so there is a present revelation in the world of His wrath (cf. 4:15, 9:22; Ephesians 2:1-3, 5:6, 1 Thessalonians 2:16).
- b. But given Paul's assertion that the divine wrath is currently being revealed from heaven, it raises the question as to the *manner* of its disclosure and operation. Certainly the majority of men see no evidence in the world of the operation of God's wrath. The first issue that must be addressed is whether Paul understood this revelation as taking place in the *human psyche*, in *providential acts*, or both. While the context does concern itself in part with human thought processes, the parallelism of verses 1:17-18 points to the idea of revelation through historical act. For as the revelation of God's righteousness in the gospel refers to an historical disclosure in time and space, so the parallel idea of the revelation of His wrath should be viewed from the same perspective. Moreover, the fact that this revealed wrath is not discerned by men as they go about their lives also argues against the idea that it is revealed in the human psyche.

Assuming, then, that this revelation is active rather than cognitive, in what sense is God actively manifesting His wrath? The succeeding context seems to indicate that the substance of this outpouring of wrath is God's giving of men over to themselves (1:24-32). This shows how His judgment can be operating in the present time and yet men can live unaware of it: *since all men are defined by personal insistence upon self-determination, the fact that God gives them over to it is undetectable to them*. They pursue their course of life for their own reasons according to their own will and have no sense at all of God's involvement. This "blindness" to His hand results in their regarding the folly, emptiness, misery, and calamity that accompany a self-determined, autonomous life as the byproducts of bad luck, bad relationships, and perhaps even some bad choices, but never as God's judgment. This, then, appears to be the point of Paul's parallelism in verses 1:17-18: *Through the gospel God is revealing to the world that His kingdom - marked by His own righteousness becoming man's in Christ - has been inaugurated. So also, through the cross, He has testified to His judgment of the world's rebellion and brought a new dimension to human unbelief and thereby heightened human guilt* (cf. John 15:18-24; Acts 14:8-18, 17:16-31; etc.).

- c. Thus, God's wrath is directed toward "*all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.*" The first thing to note is that Paul's intent was not to exempt men themselves, as if the divine wrath is concerned only with the *ethical* rather than the *personal*. The following context makes it clear that God's judgment is directed toward *men*, but the reason is their ungodliness and unrighteousness. By phrasing his words as he did Paul was emphasizing that wrath is directed toward *sin*. As he will show, where there is no unrighteousness there is no wrath (5:1-10).

Another thing to observe is his use of the two similar nouns, *ungodliness* and *unrighteousness*. All sorts of explanations have been given for this, ranging from the conviction that they are essentially synonymous in this context to elaborate word studies showing substantial and intricate nuances of individual meaning and interrelationship between them. What may be stated is that the former noun is semantically concerned with *religious* unrighteousness, in effect making it a subset of the latter. However, Paul also uses the term *ungodliness* in reference to sin in general and not in a strictly religious sense (11:25-27; Titus 2:11-12), so that it is not necessary here to draw a sharp distinction between the two. If they are to be distinguished at all, the context best supports associating *ungodliness* with sins against the person and prerogative of God (ref. 1:19-23) and *unrighteousness* with sins against the moral order of His creation (ref. 1:24-31).

- d. Specifically, Paul was concerned with the unrighteousness associated with *suppression of the truth*. The fact that men suppress the truth indicates that they *know* the truth, and that is precisely Paul's argument. The truth is evident to men by virtue of general revelation that is both *innate* to them as image-bearers and *observed* in the created order; "*that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them*" (1:19; cf. 1:20 and 2:14-16).
- 1) The truth that men suppress pertains to *God's nature and character*. The issue is not the outright denial of God's existence, but the insistence upon fashioning Him according to human sensibility. Paul's argument follows this line: God's self-revelation is openly evident to men, so that they undeniably know the truth of His existence, His eternal nature, and divine power (1:20a). Yet, being intuitively aware of the obligation this truth imposes upon them, they choose to suppress rather than submit to it.
 - 2) Accordingly, he insists that men suppress the truth *in unrighteousness*. Some have held that Paul was referring to the manner of that suppression; i.e., men suppress the truth *unrighteously*. It has also been argued that he meant that their act of suppression proceeds out of their innate unrighteousness as fallen men. Both of these interpretations are at least possible given Paul's grammar. However, the grammar together with the context seems to indicate that his meaning was that men suppress the truth through the *means* of unrighteousness. In other words, their unrighteous lives are the means by which they suppress the truth - *by living as they do men effectively deny what is self-evident and clearly evident to them*.

The correctness of this interpretation becomes more apparent when it is recalled that the specific arena of truth they suppress pertains to the character and authority of God; specifically, His majesty as sovereign Creator and Lord. *The reason they suppress this particular knowledge is because of what happened in the Garden.* Men unrighteously retain to themselves the prerogative to think, judge, and act independently. As they live in this way the truth of God's sovereign authority and dominion is suppressed, and God is effectively made subordinate to His image-bearer.

This points to an important distinction that must not be missed. On the surface it may appear that Paul was saying that men suppress the truth by ignoring it or denying it altogether. Yet the context here leads to a much more provocative meaning, *namely that men suppress the truth by exercising themselves in relation to it in a manner that serves their insistence upon self-determination.* In other words, they need not deny altogether God's existence, nature, or power; they simply live their lives in a way that is inconsistent with those realities; *they live as if God were not who He is and they are not who they really are* (ref. 1:21-23).

- e. As a result of their innate and experiential knowledge of God and willful refusal to act in accordance with it, men are "*without excuse*" (1:20b). This is one of the most powerful assertions in the entire Scripture, for it silences any contention that there are those who are ignorant of God and, therefore, innocent before Him. Some have sought to limit Paul's words to individuals deemed guilty of *consciously* rejecting the true God, thereby exonerating the pagan world that has never heard of Yahweh and His Christ. But his argumentation allows no such limitation; those who are without excuse are those who know God *through the things that He has made*; things in which His power and deity are clearly seen and understood. Since every human being has access to this revelation - in fact, none is able to escape it - all are without excuse.
- f. In verse 1:18 Paul asserted that men are not ignorant of the truth; they *suppress* it. He then justified his contention in verses 1:19-20 and concluded that this willful suppression leaves all without excuse. In turn, in verse 1:21 Paul explained specifically *how* men suppress the truth, and so are left without excuse. And, as has been indicated, the way in which they suppress what is clearly evident to them is by living contrary to what they know. *Although all men know God through His self-revelation, they effectively refuse to acknowledge Him as God by refusing to honor and give thanks to Him* (1:21a). Again, it is vital to understand that Paul was not addressing the unrighteousness of atheism, but *idolatry* (ref. 1:23). The nature of sin does not necessitate atheism; in fact, few people are truly atheists.

"Man, the bearer of the imprint of the divine image, knows the truth of the 'eternal power and deity' of his Creator and is conscious of his obligation to honor and worship him as God and to be thankful to him for his goodness...he cannot escape from himself or from his duty to worship God in spirit and truth." (Hughes, opt. cited)

If the account of the Fall reveals anything, it shows that the essence of sin is simply a perverted perspective from which a person views himself in relation to God. By pointing specifically to men's refusal to honor God and give Him thanks Paul was putting his finger on the crux of man's unbelief: *unbelief is rarely true atheism, but it is always the failure to live in a submissive, dependent, and grateful relationship with God.* The calamity in the garden established a new human reality that would define all future generations, and it reveals that the essence of unrighteousness is not doing bad things; it is *self-determination* - man exalting himself to the place of God. Such self-determination often expresses itself in the greatest manifestations of morality, philanthropy, and religious zeal.

This principle of human rebellion in the context of knowledge is central to Paul's argument in this context. Men have not ceased to acknowledge God because, with the passing of the ages, they have lost all knowledge of Him. Not only Paul's grammar but also logic itself argues against this conclusion. For the very fact that men *refuse* to honor and give thanks to God presupposes that they know of Him. Otherwise, their dereliction would be the result of *ignorance* and not *obstinacy*. Their problem is not a lack of spirituality, rationality, awareness, information, or understanding; their problem is that they will not have God rule over them (Psalm 2:1-3). He may inform them, provide for them, assist them, and even in some way complement them, but he must not take authority over them.

- g. Finally, Paul conveyed to his Roman readers the *result* of this unrighteousness: *"they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened"* (1:21b-23). It has been observed that when man forsakes his created nature and function, he dies to himself. As image-bearer, estrangement from God means estrangement from himself. Paul referred to the fruit of this "death" under the parallel ideas of *vain reasoning* and the *darkening of an undiscerning heart*, the grammar of both indicating effects to which men are subjected apart from their conscious will or effort. The former has to do with how man thinks, and the latter with the very marrow of his humanity; both are devastated by self-determination.

When man's rationality and humanity are corrupted he loses the capacity to distinguish between reality and illusion: *"Professing to be wise, they became fools."* The tragedy of man is that he has convinced himself that, in the exercise of his self-declared liberation, he has attained wisdom and sophistication, while in truth he has become a fool, alienated from God and himself. What he believes to be freedom is actually the worst form of bondage. This is nothing more than the catastrophe of Eden repeated in the individual lives of all of Adam's offspring.

The necessary outcome of this predicament is *idolatry*. Man, the image-bearer, cannot worship God because he is given to worship *himself*. Since for fallen man honor belongs to *self*, he exchanges the divine glory for *an image* - a substitute taking various discrete forms, but all pointing to the same reality: *whether he employs an image in his own likeness, or that of another creature over which he exercises dominion, man's worship is inexorably directed toward himself.*