

American Idols

Romans 1:18–23

Studies in Romans #6

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The good news—no, the stupendous news—is that God has revealed his gift of righteousness. And when we receive it by faith we enter into a right relationship with God. The question to ask now is, “Why do we need righteousness?” The answer is that apart from Jesus Christ we stand in a wrong relationship with God. And so you see here Paul’s contrast between God’s righteousness in verse 17 and now God’s wrath in 1:18.

And from 1:18–3:20 Paul explains to us humanity’s need of the revelation of God’s righteousness in the gospel mentioned in 1:17 and again in 3:21. In between these two beautiful statements of the gospel he describes the ugliness of our sin, which is the reason it is so necessary to be justified by faith alone. So what is the reason we need God’s righteousness? The answer is to save us from God’s own wrath against our ungodliness and unrighteousness. We see ungodliness and unrighteousness in our relationship with God in 1:18–23 and then unrighteousness and unrighteousness in our relationship with our neighbors in 1:24–32. In fact, our ungodly and unrighteous idolatry leads to ungodly and unrighteous immorality. As one ancient Jewish writing said, “For the worshipping of idols not to be named is the beginning, the cause, and the end, of all evil” (Wisdom of Solomon 14:27).

This morning I want to open up to you verses 18–23. And I want to do so in a way I have not done for a while. I want to explain the passage in a long sentence and then go

back and explain that sentence: *God is revealing his wrath against humanity that suppresses his knowledge in giving societies up to idolatry.*

God is Revealing His Wrath

God is revealing his wrath. Look around you, brothers and sisters. What do you see? We see the beach. We'll see a beautiful sunset tonight. We see smiles on people's faces because "life's rad in Carlsbad." We do see this and a lot more. But Paul says we also need to see that **the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men** (v. 18).

The very mention of God being wrathful is so offensive today. Sadly, because many of us do not have dads who acted worthy of the name, we say, "How can God be wrathful like my dad was?" But God's wrath is not fly off the handle anger like many of our dads expressed. God's wrath is "His holy displeasure with sin"¹ and therefore his "punitive justice."² Others find wrath offensive because they view God through the lens of merely one of his attributes: "God is love." Don't we hear this in pious sounding phrases like, "God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life?" or, "God loves you, and so do we." But let me state this boldly and say if there is no wrath there can be no love in God. Or even more boldly and say if your God is merely love it's not God you're talking about but an idol. One writer once described American Christianity like this: "A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of

¹ Nygren, 97.

² Hodge, 35.

a Christ without a cross.”³

But Paul says this **wrath is revealed**, meaning, it is a present reality. He uses in verse 18 the same verb in the same present tense as he did of God’s righteousness in 1:17. This means God’s wrath is not only a future thing. Paul will go on to speak of “the day of wrath” in 2:5 and elsewhere speaks of “the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10; cf. 2 Thess. 1:4–9). God’s wrath is also a present thing. Our Heidelberg Catechism summarizes these two revelations of God’s wrath saying, “As a just judge he punishes [our sin] now and in eternity” (Q&A 10). And God is revealing this wrath not merely against individuals sinners here and there but **against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of *men***. It’s plural. It means of humanity that stands outside of Jesus Christ. It also means societies like our own.⁴ *God is revealing his wrath, my friends.*

Against Humanity that Suppress His Knowledge

And he is doing so *against humanity that suppresses his knowledge*. Jesus said if we do not believe in him we “stand[...] condemned already” (John 3:18) and “the wrath of God remains on” us (John 3:36). Paul explains why here when he says humanity and societies **by their unrighteousness suppress the truth** (v. 18).

Children, the next time you go into a jacuzzi I want you to try and keep the bubbles from coming up to the surface of a pool with your hands. Maybe you’ve already tried this. Can you do it? No! It’s impossible. You can try and you want but those bubbles are coming up. This is like what the unbeliever does with the knowledge they have about

³ *The Kingdom of God in America* (1937; repr., New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 193.

⁴ Luther, 155–156; Nygren, 99–100; Schreiner, 83–85.

God. They try and try and try to keep it from coming up from their heart to their head, but eventually it will make its way there and condemn them. According to the Psalms the fool says, “there is no God” (Pss. 14:1; 53:1). And he fools himself to ask about his unrighteous behavior, “How can God know?” (Ps. 73:11). But God knows. And the unbeliever knows that God knows. Why would a person deny God’s existence? As Augustine said, “Nobody denies God save one whose interest it is that there be no God.”⁵

What truth does the unbeliever suppress?

For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. (vv. 19–20)

There is what we call a “general revelation” of God in creation. It reveals the existence and power of God. Notice the beautiful oxymoron in the text, which is not as clear as it is in Greek: **His invisible attributes...have been clearly perceived** (v. 20). His invisibility is *visible*! “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps. 19:1). Day by day the creation preaches God’s existence (Ps. 19:2–4). The prophet Amos said, “He who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea and pours them out on the surface of the earth, the LORD is his name” (Amos 5:8). As the great Roman philosopher and politician, Cicero, said, “That the gods, then, do exist is so evident that I should scarcely regard the man who denied it as being of sound mind.” He also said, “Can any sane person think that all this grouping of the stars, and this vast ordering of the heavens, could have resulted from

⁵ Can’t find source.

atoms coursing to and fro fortuitously and at random?”⁶

But notice that this knowledge of God in creation is of God as Creator, not as a Savior. It is God as Judge, not Father. It is Law, not Gospel. Its purpose is to leave humanity **without excuse** (1:20) when we die and stand before his tribunal. In other words contrary to popular evangelical Christian books, there is no “gospel in the stars” in the Zodiac. The special revelation of the grace of God is found only in Jesus Christ, whose righteousness becomes ours because our unrighteousness became and he was punished by God’s wrath on the cross! *God is revealing his wrath against humanity that suppresses his knowledge.*

In Giving Societies Up to Idolatry

The question is how is God’s wrath coming upon humanity now? We saw in our recent series through Revelation that God’s wrath is being poured out now drop by drop on the human race in famines and wars, warning of the full deluge of judgment to come (Rev. 16). But there is another way his wrath is revealed now: *in giving societies up to idolatry.*⁷

What are our biggest idols here in American culture, that we all are guilty of worshipping? I know we typically think of idolatry as little statues, but an idol can be an idea. An idol is anything we serve alongside God or in the place of God (HC, Q&A 95). One of our great idols is pleasure. More and more our culture defines our humanity as sex. Another of our great idols is power. I read an article about a Senator recently that

⁶ Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 2.16; 2.44.

⁷ Nygren, 110–111.

illustrates this.⁸ This republican Senator was on a plane and asked his stance on abortion and said he was “pro-choice.” The person next to him asked if he could end child trafficking would he give up his Senate seat. He said no. He was asked what was more important, serving God our country. He said country. Another of our great idols is possessions. I want it all and I want it now!

Why are we this way? As Paul goes on to say, our idolatry is rooted in a lack of gratitude to God and in its place we put our love of self.⁹ Self—that’s the great idol of all! God shows his present wrath upon the world in his giving up the world to the sins it wants to serve in its selfishness. We’ll come to verses 24–32 next Sunday, but notice how verses 24, 26, and 28 all say “God gave them up.” God has given our nation over to the idolatry of self.

Idolatry is the refusal to worship the one true God: **For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened** (v. 21). God has enlightened the path to himself. But we haven’t listened and instead tried to take a shortcut and went off the path into the darkness. What’s happened? We’ve become lost.

Idolatry is the worship of self. And so those who thinking was **futile** and whose hearts were **darkened** also **claim[ed] to be wise** but instead **became fools** (v. 22). **Claiming to be wise**. Isn’t this reminiscent of Satan’s claim to Adam and Eve if they would eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil? But as Paul says elsewhere, the

⁸ <https://www.lifesitenews.com/blog/my-2-hour-flight-next-to-the-gop-senator-who-made-the-mistake-of-telling-me>.

⁹ Luther, *Works* 159–160.

world through wisdom did not know God (1 Cor. 1:21). And the wise philosophers that we are we **exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things** (v. 23). We are religious by nature. God made us to worship. We have skewed that original purpose but it's still there. We must worship something. We don't worship the true God and so we worship ourselves in this "selfie" culture. Martin Luther said unbelievers do not worship God's divinity untouched but have "changed and adjusted it to their desires and needs. Everyone wanted to see the divinity in the one who appealed to him."¹⁰ I couldn't have said it better myself.

Conclusion

*God is revealing his wrath against humanity that suppresses his knowledge in giving societies up to idolatry: **For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men*** (v. 18). God has left us to ourselves in our ungodliness and in our unrighteousness. What's the way out from under his wrath? The righteousness of his Son Jesus Christ. Will you give yourself to him? Amen!

¹⁰ Luther, *Works* 25:157.