

Week 3 | Romans 1:18–32

Are you ready for another week of Romans? We may have only gotten through Paul's introductory greeting, but we've already explored some amazing concepts. The good news that Paul is determined to announce fulfills the Hebrew Scriptures while subverting the propaganda of Caesar. He's declaring to Jews and Gentiles that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah whose reign is supreme over all. As we are learning, the implications of this news are mind-blowing, cosmic and glorious. The gospel reveals the righteousness of the one, true God. It pulls back the curtain and allows all to see his loving desire to put all things right. As we look out at a world ravaged by sin and suffering, how could we not rejoice in this very good news?

This week we're moving into the body of Paul's letter. If Romans is like a symphony, this passage is its first major movement. Its tone is dark and chaotic with a somber note of warning. But the breath-taking crescendo that we'll build to later in the letter will be all the more joyful for having spent some time in the shadows.

Day 1

Recall that Paul has multiple purposes for writing Romans. He wants to establish a personal connection with a church he didn't start and ask for their support in his mission to Spain. Also, this church was experiencing serious conflict over how followers of Jesus should understand the law (or Torah), so Paul wanted to expound upon the meaning and implications of the gospel for Jews and Gentiles. Though they come from vastly different backgrounds, lifestyles, and worldviews, he wants these groups to understand what the gospel means for them, and how it brings all believers into one, unified family. To accomplish this Paul will take every opportunity to show that both Jew and Gentile suffer from the same terminal malady — sin. Both groups need the same cure — Jesus Christ.

In these verses, Paul has plotted the downward spiral in which humanity is trapped because it has strayed from a right relationship with God. His descriptions give the sense of “evil run amuck.” One scholar describes this passage, “sin tumbles over sin with dizzying speed, and the human desire to rebel against God seems to be the only unifying principle of this otherwise chaotic activity.”¹

Take some time today to acquaint yourself with our central passage. Notice what Paul says about how this sin-spiral begins, what propels it, and where it leads. Pay attention to the flow of Paul's argument by noticing linking words like “since,” “for,” and “because” that show a cause and effect, and “therefore” and “furthermore” that point to a conclusion. Record your initial thoughts and questions.

¹ Frank Thielman, *Romans*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018) 101.

Read the Word

Romans 1:18–32 (NIV)

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since 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 people are without excuse.

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. 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 a mortal human being 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 about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual 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 shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they 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 have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. 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.

- What did you notice about the flow of Paul's thoughts here? What is the problem, how does it worsen and what are the consequences? (We'll discuss this in greater detail throughout the week but record your preliminary thoughts.)
- Take one more look at the passage and mark some key terms and phrases we'll examine this week: "wrath," "exchanged," and "gave them over."

Reflect

- A lot of people are uncomfortable talking about God’s wrath. In their minds it conjures up an image of a violent and angry God who smites sinners and throws them into hell. What is your reaction to this passage?
- This passage hits on a topic that is sensitive in our time, gender and sexuality. Do you have thoughts or questions about this passage’s view of sexual behavior?

Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, help me understand the truth you are teaching in this passage. While I want to always remember your love and mercy, I need to understand the consequences of sin. I praise you because you are righteous and just. Thank you that Jesus has provided me with an escape from the judgment that sin brings. Help me feel your compassion for those around me who don’t know you or feel trapped by their sin.

Day 2

Some people have a picture of God as a vengeful deity who’s waiting to hurl lightning bolts at sinners who dare to step out of line. Others see God as a kindly, old, gray-haired grandfather who might wag his finger at you if you do something wrong but would never actually punish you. Romans declares both of these conceptions as wrong. Our passage this week helps us understand why.

To make sure we keep the flow of Paul’s thought, we’re going to back-up and include Romans 1:17 in our reading today.

Read the Word

Romans 1:17–23 (NIV)

¹⁷ For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since 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 people are without excuse.

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. 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 a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

- Verse 17 and 18 both use the word “revealed”? What is being revealed?
- What has God made plain according to verse 19?
- What two sins does humanity commit according to verse 21?
- In verse 23 we see the first use of the word “exchange.” What is being exchanged?

Reflect

The gospel reveals God’s righteousness because through Jesus Christ, he is setting all things right. This includes reconciling his relationship with humanity and bringing justice to his creation. Humanity has willfully wandered from him and corrupted his good design. He cannot turn a blind eye to rebellion, or the evil humans perpetrate against one another. The wrath being revealed against godlessness and wickedness is righteous. God is rightly angered by that which destroys what he so lovingly created.

Paul is outlining a pattern of corruption and degradation that results from a failure to worship the one, true God. While God does not reveal himself utterly in creation, Paul believes that there is ample evidence to direct one’s worship (verse 19), yet people have suppressed that knowledge (verse 18).

The creation points to a Creator. Only he could have designed a world so complex, beautiful and adapted for life. Instead of responding with gratitude, people rebel against his design and refuse to acknowledge their dependence on God. Yet because at their core, human beings are designed to worship, they will worship gods of their own creation. With futile thoughts and darkened hearts, they make a ridiculous exchange —the glory of the powerful, everlasting and faithful God for idols that will rot and return to dust. Apart from God, humanity degenerates into something far from who he intended them to be.

Paul has outlined a broad human trend that mirrors the choices each person must make. We were intended to have a relationship with our Creator and cannot find our truest purpose apart from him. We simply weren’t designed to flourish without God. But we will try. Our culture provides endless substitutes, but as Augustine noted over 1600 years ago, “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in you.”

- According to Paul, how is God’s righteousness revealed in his wrath toward sin? Have you ever watched someone destroy themselves or others with their sin? If so, can you relate to God’s anger?
- What “created thing” do you see people in modern American “worshipping”?

Pray

If it’s helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, though I would have willfully pursued a life without you, you opened my eyes to your goodness and mercy and saved me. Thank you! I am so grateful for my relationship with you. Draw me ever closer to you, grow my faith and give me strength to fight the temptation to seek meaning and purpose in anything other than you. I love you, Father.

Day 3

We've arrived at Paul's first major movement in his letter to the Roman church. He has taken us up for a 10,000-foot view of God's righteousness and human rebellion. Because of his passionate concern for humanity, God cannot tolerate that which would destroy it. A loving God is a just god and is angered by the destructive power of sin. Apart from the life-giving goodness and love of God, humanity becomes a distortion of what God designed it to be.

Read the Word

Romans 1:24–27 (NIV)

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 about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual 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 shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Where do you see the phrase “give them over”? What does God give them over to?

Reflect

Paul now moves from a description of how humans turn away from God to a description of the consequences. Like a low bass note, the phrase “give them over” reverberates over this passage, twice in the verses we read today. The first time is a general statement. Paul has already described how denying God and turning instead to idols can distort thoughts and feelings (verse 21). He explains the degradation that comes from removing God from his rightful place, embracing a lie and worshipping created things over the Creator.

In these verses, some scholars see echoes of Genesis 3 where Adam and Eve reject God's will in order to assert their own.² In a sense, God gives them what they wanted. By eating from

² N. T. Wright, “Romans,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* 10, (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) 349.

the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, their eyes are opened. Instead of depending on God for guidance, they are released to make moral decisions apart from him. By removing himself, God “gives them over” to their own desires, and the consequences are dire.

The Creator designed sex as an expression of oneness between a husband and wife. It is a deep intimacy meant to affect mind, body and soul that may also create new life. Yet in biblical times, many pagan cultures acted with no regard for the sanctity of sexual intimacy, the human body, or the consequences that come from excessive, unrestrained sexual desire. For a Jew like Paul, such sexual sins were prime examples of dark hearts acting in degrading and exploitative ways: degrading for what one did to his or her own body and exploitative because of what one did to another's.

With his second use of “gave them over” Paul gives a more specific example. Paul saw any sexual activity outside of marriage as wrong including same-sex sexual behavior. It was prohibited by the law (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13) and was also seen as “unnatural” because it distorted gender roles, the functions of human bodies, and did not produce children.³ But here it is a more excessive, out-of-control, unrestrained lust that Paul is describing to make his point (verse 27).

The kind of sexual depravity Paul is referencing likely involved the abuse of those who had less power and status in Roman society. Recall that many members of Roman churches were slaves and former slaves who would have had no authority over their own bodies. From what we know of Roman history, it was not uncommon for both female and male slaves to experience sexual abuse.⁴

In Romans 1:18–32, Paul is drawing us into a scene where chaos and evil are running rampant. It is worth noting Paul is not addressing all the questions believers have today about same-sex attraction and sexual orientation. Paul doesn't have monogamous, same-sex relationships in view, although he would have seen them as outside of God's moral plan. He is describing unbridled, sexual immorality as an example of the kind of sinful desire which humanity indulges apart from God. He will get to many other examples of sin and sinful desire in the verses we'll read tomorrow.

- While Paul is depicting rampant, sexual depravity, sexual sin is something that affects us all. Lust, pornography, pre-marital sex, adultery, withholding sex or coercing sex from a spouse as a form of manipulation, and so on. Is there any sexual sin in your life that you need to confess to God? Are there patterns of sin you need to repent from? Your Father wants to forgive and restore you. Consider sharing your struggle with someone you trust who will support you and pray for you. Don't let fear and shame keep you from seeking help.
- Far too many of us have experienced the pain and devastation that comes from sexual sin. If you are one, have you taken that pain to the Father and asked for healing? If

³Sarah Heaner Lancaster, *Romans*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2015), 33.

⁴N.T. Wright, 348.

you've been hurt or abused sexually, God wants to heal and restore you. Have you sought help in dealing with the trauma? You don't have to carry the burden alone.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, thank you for your mercy in sending Jesus to redeem humanity. We all too often reject your ways and insist on going our own way, and we suffer for it. Draw me closer to you. Convict me of my sin. Heal broken places. Give me compassion for those who struggle with sexual temptation of all kinds. I want to be a conduit of your grace, truth and love.

Day 4

This week in our study of Romans Paul is challenging us to consider the consequences of humanity's rejection of God and the embrace of idols. Paul has described a downward spiral of human depravity and we've just about reached the bottom.

Read the Word

Romans 1:28–32 (NIV)

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they 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 have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. 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.

- Where do you see the phrase “gave them over”? What did God give them over to?
- What have they become filled with?

Reflect

Our final few verses are a chaotic cacophony of sin and evil. Scholars often note that in the Greek these verses pack an even greater punch.⁵ One long sentence, Paul plays with words and sounds to drive his point home. What begins this list of vices is Paul's final use of the phrase

⁵ James D. G. Dunn, [Romans 1–8](#), vol. 38A, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 54.

“gave them over.” Here Paul notes that the consequence of willfully wandering from God is a depraved mind — one that can no longer determine God’s will, much less follow it. Paul doesn’t view sin as merely breaking some arbitrary rule, as if God were an overly strict boss or nitpicky teacher. The deeds Paul describes are “subhuman or nonhuman behavior...unfitting for a human being to perform.”⁶ As our Creator, God designed us for so much more than this.

Notice that these sins are relational. They are sins people who bear the image of God are committing against other image-bearers. The word translated “wickedness” in verse 29 can also be translated as unrighteousness or injustice. Humanity was created in the image of a righteous God and were to act as his vice regents in the world, representing the King’s just reign. In turning from its Creator, humanity not only loses this sense of purpose, but acts in selfish and greedy ways to subjugate and exploit one another, creating injustice.

Having run through a litany of vices, Paul ends with a final blow. Not only are these sins committed with abandon, their practice wins approval from others. Paul asserts that humanity is accountable for its sins because people “know God’s righteous decree.” This does not mean that those outside of Israel are expected to know the Jewish law, but that in general, humans have an awareness that “certain types of behaviors are inherently dehumanizing, to their practitioners as well as to their victims.”⁷ These behaviors end in death, and that is deserved.

Now that we’ve reached the end of Paul’s argument, let’s consider why he’s included it. For whose benefit has he mapped this trajectory of human sin? Recall that simmering inside the Roman churches is a conflict between Jewish believers and Gentile believers over the law. This conflict wasn’t limited to Rome. Uniting two groups of people who had historically mistrusted and even despised one another was a challenge that only the gospel could overcome.

In Romans 1:18–32 Paul is playing off of a commonly held Jewish stereotype of pagan Gentiles. With its vivid wording and hyperbolic language, his description mirrors what a first century Jew would have thought of Gentile culture.⁸ No doubt Jewish believers would have been nodding along as Phoebe read this indictment aloud.⁹ “Yes!” we can imagine some of them thinking, “this is what Gentiles are like and why they need the law!”

“Not so fast,” Paul will reply. In chapter 2 we will see Paul turn the tables and puncture any self-righteousness Jewish believers might have felt. His description of idolatry and sin in this passage indicted them too.

- Look over the list of vices Paul includes. Do you see some prevalent in our culture? What about in your own life? Pray for God’s truth, love, grace and mercy to transform your own heart and the hearts of people you know.

⁶ N.T. Wright, 351.

⁷ N.T. Wright, 351.

⁸ James Dunn, 74.

⁹ Scot McKnight, *Reading Romans Backwards*. Unpublished manuscript, 2018.

Pray

If it's helpful, use the following to begin your own prayer time with God.

Father, I am reminded of the destructive power of sin. You have lovingly created us and nothing good can ever come from rejecting your design for me and my life. By your Spirit's power I want to live out your will. I want to love others and seek righteousness. Protect me from the evil one who seeks to tempt and destroy. Thank you for saving me and showing me your truth.

Day 5

On Day 5 of our guide each week, we will spend some time reflecting on what we've learned, connect it with our lives, spend extended time in prayer and consider our next steps in following Christ.

Reflect on what you've learned

One of the goals of studying the Bible is to build on our understanding of who God is and how we relate to him. What did you notice this week about God, his character and his relationship with humanity? What about the plight of human beings? And though Paul didn't specifically mention the gospel this week, how do you think the good news of Jesus Christ relates to this passage? Read through Romans 1:18–32 one more time and think about what you've learned or been reminded of.

- What is your biggest takeaway from your study this week?

Make Connections

The fundamental sin is human failure to honor God and setting something else up in God's place. – Frank Thielman

Idolatry is the folly of asking a gift to be a giver. – Dane Ortland

Even after we know Jesus and have chosen to follow him, we may still try to fill the God-shaped holes in our lives with all manner of “created things” — beautifully furnished houses, the latest technology, rigorous exercise programs, a successful career, kids destined for the Ivy League, exciting travel, status among our peers, and on and on. Instead of being thankful for them, we'll corrupt our Father's blessings by turning them into idols. We'll treat the gift as the giver. We may not bring offerings to carved images, but we will sacrifice plenty in pursuit of that which we believe will grant us peace, prosperity, and satisfaction. If we get nothing else from Romans 1:18–32 it should be to guard our hearts from creating “gods” because we mistakenly believe they give us what can only come from God.

Our gracious and loving Father deserves all our gratitude and thanksgiving. He alone is worthy to be praised. He has designed us for peace, love and purpose. But it is only in turning to him in Christ and by the Spirit that we can be transformed into who he intended us to be. Only our Father is worth our ultimate devotion — loving him with all our hearts, mind soul and strength. We must seek his goodness, experience his love, and live according to his will. As we've seen this week, all other paths bring heartache, pain and destruction.

Pray

Based on what you've read and reflected on this week, spend some time with your Father in prayer. To help you get started, here are a few prompts based on our passage for the week. Use these or create your own.

- Pray for those you know who seem to be “suppressing the truth” and have not yet experienced the saving power of the gospel (Romans 1:16–20).
- Gratitude can be a powerful force. Express your praise and thanksgiving to God. Write out a prayer of thanksgiving, sing his praises, tell someone why you are so grateful to God. By glorifying him, we can resist the call of worthless idols (Romans 1:21–23).
- Repent of your personal sin and pray for those who seem entrapped by it (Romans 1:24–32).
- Ask for God's mercy on our community, nation and world. Pray that the Spirit will draw people to himself and not give them over to sinful desires and depraved minds (Romans 1:28–32).

What's Your Next Step?

- If you've been convicted of sin this week, consider what your next steps will be. Have you sought God's forgiveness and repented? Are there people whose forgiveness you need to seek? Changes you need to make to avoid temptation?
- This section of Romans should remind us of the consequences of sin and how desperately we need the salvation Jesus provides. It should also remind us that the gospel is news that the whole world needs to hear. Who will you tell?