

THE PLAZA COLLEGE BIBLE STUDY

The Letter to the Romans

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Romans 1:18-32

This unit of text is one of the most abused sections of the New Testament. Christians often use this as a proof text to oppress homosexuals. But the central thesis of this passage is about the wrath of God being revealed to those who oppress truth—to those who choose self, or the creation, over our creator. Each sin that is mentioned in this passage must be read within this context.

Paul is writing to a church made up of Jews and Gentiles. Some interpreters see this section primarily directed to the Gentile audience, as the arguments Paul uses are rooted in Jewish thinking of his day. However, in 2.1-29 he will show how the Jews fit into 1.18-32. Therefore it is plausible to see that Paul is arguing that this segment applies to *all*.

FOR THE WRATH OF GOD IS REVEALED FROM HEAVEN AGAINST ALL UNGODLINESS AND WICKEDNESS OF MEN WHO BY THEIR WICKEDNESS SUPPRESS THE TRUTH (V. 18-19)

Paul writes about the wrath of God in the same way he writes about the righteousness of God in verse seventeen. God's self-disclosure, his revealing, is a double edged sword. This gives the gospel a prophetic dimension of the gospel: find salvation in God's righteousness by choosing love and grace¹ or find his judgment by suppressing the truth.² The wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and wickedness. This is not the cause of God's wrath. Rather Paul will go on to show that moral depravity is the result of God's wrath and not its cause. In this passage, wickedness is better translated "unrighteousness" to illuminate the contrast that Paul is painting against "the righteousness of God."

FOR WHAT CAN BE KNOWN ABOUT GOD IS PLAIN TO THEM, BECAUSE GOD HAS SHOWN IT TO THEM. EVER SINCE THE CREATION OF THE WORLD HIS INVISIBLE NATURE, NAMELY, HIS ETERNAL POWER AND DEITY, HAS BEEN CLEARLY PERCEIVED IN THE THINGS THAT HAVE BEEN MADE. SO THEY ARE WITHOUT EXCUSE; 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 SENSELESS MINDS WERE DARKENED. CLAIMING TO BE WISE, THEY BECAME FOOLS, AND EXCHANGED THE

¹ Or by placing your faith in Christ's faithfulness to God.

² A brief examination of the prophets throughout the Old Testament shows that their message is one of judgment and potential repentance. This is what is meant by "prophetic."

GLORY OF THE IMMORTAL GOD FOR IMAGES RESEMBLING MORTAL MAN OR BIRDS OR ANIMALS OR REPTILES (v. 20-24)

Fundamentally, humanity has a worship problem. You can worship the living God or worship _____. Paul says that there is enough evidence within creation and the world for us to see God's power, but we are too focused on our own human power to realize his Lordship. Proper worship means giving God honor and giving God thanks. But instead of doing this humanity participates in a great and tragic exchange. We settle for less than what God's creational intentions were, and are, for us. With the exchange of the truth for a lie, we started turning towards our own desires. We look away from the Creator to worship the creature and we begin to fall apart. And the further we look away from God and toward self love, the more we believe the lie and start to accept the lie as the truth.

THEREFORE GOD GAVE THEM UP IN THE LUSTS OF THEIR HEARTS TO IMPURITY, TO THE DISHONORING OF THEIR BODIES AMONG THEMSELVES, BECAUSE THEY EXCHANGED THE TRUTH ABOUT GOD FOR A LIE AND WORSHIPED AND SERVED THE CREATURE RATHER THAN THE CREATOR, WHO IS BLESSED FOR EVER! AMEN (v. 25)

Humanity has a worship problem, which leads to the suppression of truth.³ Paul writes "God gave them up." Paul repeats this phrase three times, which emphasizes its importance and centrality to understanding this unit of Scripture. In its first usage, Paul shows how we sin against God by exchanging proper worship for improper worship.

God's wrath is usually seen as judgment day when God will judge the living and the dead, some to eternal life and some to eternal death. This is true in an eschatological sense. But another dimension of God's wrath is that it is being revealed today. In the present, God's wrath is handing humanity over to itself. As we're handed over to ourselves, our hearts are oriented to impurity. Humanity worships itself, creation, and therefore idols. This is evident in our own lives; we often elevate career and our goals above seeking God. We don't call these things "gods" but they are idols by the biblical definition.⁴

FOR THIS REASON GOD GAVE THEM UP TO DISHONORABLE PASSIONS. THEIR WOMEN EXCHANGED NATURAL RELATIONS FOR UNNATURAL, AND THE MEN LIKEWISE GAVE UP NATURAL RELATIONS WITH WOMEN AND WERE CONSUMED WITH PASSION FOR ONE ANOTHER, MEN COMMITTING

³ Another way of saying this is that because humanity is not in right relationship with their creator, they are disoriented and do not understand the world as "it really is."

⁴ To learn more about idols in our context, read "Counterfeit Gods" by Tim Keller; or the chapter "The Living God Confronts Idolatry" in "The Mission of God" by Christopher Wright.

SHAMELESS ACTS WITH MEN AND RECEIVING IN THEIR OWN PERSONS THE DUE PENALTY FOR THEIR ERROR. (v. 26-27)

This is Paul's second use of "God gave them up." This time Paul reveals how humanity sins against the created order. To pick out these two verses without context is irresponsible. Yes, God is condemning same sex activities, but this section is Paul's very Jewish way of describing the decreation of humanity. As humanity is given over to themselves, their desires are distorted. This passage could easily include "sexual immorality" as a whole. Humanity continues to fall short of God's creational purposes, even in the realm of sexuality as defined by Genesis 1-2. It's important to recognize that our identity isn't our sexuality. To elevate our sexual identity to a core aspect of our identity is dangerous. Rather our identity should be rooted in who God says we are.

This is not the place to go into an excursus of how to reach people who struggle with sexual immorality, and who may have a different sexual orientation from God's creational intentions. There are further resources available in the following footnote.⁵ It must be said that Paul's condemnation of sin cannot be read outside of his exhortation "You have no excuse to pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things" (2:1). Any discussion with another regarding sin needs to be done in humility and love.

AND SINCE THEY DID NOT SEE FIT TO ACKNOWLEDGE GOD, GOD GAVE THEM UP TO A BASE MIND AND TO IMPROPER CONDUCT. THEY WERE FILLED WITH ALL MANNER OF WICKEDNESS, EVIL, COVETOUSNESS, MALICE. FULL OF ENVY, MURDER, STRIFE, DECEIT, MALIGNITY, THEY ARE GOSSIPS, SLANDERERS, HATERS OF GOD, INSOLENT, HAUGHTY, BOASTFUL, INVENTORS OF EVIL, DISOBEDIENT TO PARENTS, FOOLISH, FAITHLESS, HEARTLESS, RUTHLESS. THOUGH THEY KNOW GOD'S DECREE THAT THOSE WHO DO SUCH THINGS DESERVE TO DIE, THEY NOT ONLY DO THEM BUT APPROVE THOSE WHO PRACTICE THEM (v. 28-32)

This is Paul's final use of "God gave them up," and in this instance he shows how humanity sins against one another. The list of sins in these verses is exhaustive, and one complete sentence in the original Greek. There is a climactic dimension to the discussion of sin from v. 18-32. Humanity has sinned against God, creation and one another. But to Paul, the worst of it is that people recognize that their actions should condemn them to death, yet they encourage and approve others who practice them (v. 32). This last statement deserves more contemplation than is available to discuss here. What does it look like to recognize sin in others and not approve of what they're doing without entering into judgment? As mentioned above, this cannot be done without humility and love. May the Spirit of God direct us in truth and compassion.

⁵ The most thorough article on the subject is "Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell's Exegesis of Romans 1" by Richard Hays; Craig Kenner in his commentary "Romans" has a discussion on the topic entitled "Fusing the Horizons: Homosexual Activity" (p. 35-40).