

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, November 19, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

ROMANS 1:18-32

MAN — INNOCENT OR GUILTY? (ii)

You will remember that in the previous sermon we began our study of this awesome passage in Romans chapter one, verses 18-32. The Apostle is dealing with what he calls “**the wrath of God**,” and Paul understands this to mean God reacting in revulsion against sin. His “wrath” is His holy hostility to evil; His refusal to condone it or come to terms with it; His just judgement upon it.

He says that this wrath of God “is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men.” When we think of “the wrath of God” we usually think of Judgment Day and hell. That will be the final demonstration of God’s wrath, but that is not the “wrath” that Paul is talking about here. Notice that it is in the present tense: “The wrath of God is being revealed...” It’s happening right now. Brimstone isn’t falling on us, but a lot of bad things are happening in the world.

What is the object of God’s wrath? Paul uses two words to explain this. He says that God’s wrath is being revealed against (1) “godlessness” and (2) “wickedness.”

We discovered that “godlessness” means “living as if God doesn’t exist,” whereas “wickedness” means “living without any rules.” We also learned that “godlessness” is sin against God, and “wickedness” is a sin against man. And in this final section of Romans 1, “godlessness” is discussed in verses 19—23 and “wickedness” in verses 24—32.

Paul points out that **man is guilty on three counts of godlessness**. We found that

- he **suppresses** the truth about God,
- he **rejects** the truth about God, and
- he **replaces** the truth — he engages in idolatry.

But Paul goes on to tell us that **man is also guilty on three counts of wickedness**, and this is what we will study today. Notice that godlessness comes before wickedness, because if your vertical relationship (with God) is not right, your horizontal relationship (with your fellow man) is not going to be right.

So, we turn now to the discussion of man’s “wickedness,” his living without any rules, as found in verses 24-32.

Paul says that mankind is guilty of WICKEDNESS.

You see, when you suppress, reject, and try to replace *God*, then that automatically causes all kinds of problems in your life. As I have said, when your vertical relationship is not right, there's no way in which the horizontal relationship can be right. So, godlessness leads to wickedness. Godlessness is the root; wickedness is the fruit. When I try to live as if there is no God, then it's going to cause all kinds of problems in my life.

There's an important phrase in the second half of this chapter; it's the phrase, "God gave them over..." It's used in verse 24: "God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another." In verse 26 we are told that "God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones." Then in verse 28 Paul says that "since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, He gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done." This phrase is very important when we understand that Paul is building his courtroom case against the accused, and it literally means, "God handed these people over."

Now, what does that mean? Well, first, what does it *not* mean? It doesn't mean that these people cannot be saved. It doesn't mean that there is no hope for them. It doesn't mean that God stops loving them.

Let's say you had a nineteen-year-old son who is really making a mess of his life. He's into cocaine and all kinds of other things. He comes home drunk at 3 a.m. He's living a licentious life. And you say to him one day, "Now, son, you're nineteen, so I can't run your life for you, but if you're going to stay at home, you've got to follow the rules. If you can't do that, then you've just got to move out, because you're not going to wreck our lives too." So, your son says, "Mom, Dad, it was nice knowing you," and he walks out the door. Sadly, what you do is, you "give him over" to the lifestyle he wants to pursue. Do you want to do it? No. Were you glad to do it? No. But you've given him a free choice, and so you give him over.

The story of the Prodigal Son is another example of what we're talking about. Thank God that young fellow finally wised up and came home. But the father allowed him to leave home — he gave him over. And God sometimes has to do that with rebellious sinners; He hands them over to themselves! What an awful thought. So, you see, God's wrath operates not by God's intervention but precisely by His *not* intervening, by letting men and women go their own way. The resulting process of moral and spiritual degeneration is to be understood as a judicial act of God. It is the revelation of God's wrath. There is a chilling verse in the 81st Psalm in which God says, "My people would not listen to Me; Israel would not submit to Me. So, I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices" (Ps. 81:11-12).

What does it mean when God gives people over? It means that He allows them to reap the results of their own choices. He lets you have what you think you want. "You asked for it; you got it!" You can go out and make a mess of your life and God will not stop you because He has given you a free will. C. S. Lewis has a memorable sentence in which he says, "The lost enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded and are therefore self-enslaved." Now, folks, this is what "the wrath of God" is all about. When people reap the results of their own sin, that is the wrath of God. We can see the wrath of God everywhere; we see it in broken homes, in

child and spousal abuse, in V.D. and AIDS, and in a multitude of other tragedies that people bring upon themselves. That's the wrath of God.

When we get ourselves in a mess, God doesn't bail us out. We reap what we sow. Here's a fellow who goes up to the top of the Empire State Building, and he says, "I'm free to jump off this building if I want to." And you say to him, "Yes, of course you're free to jump." So, he goes over the side, and about twenty stories down, someone looks out a window and says, "Hey, how's it goin'?" And he says, "So far so good." Do you know any people like that? They keep on breaking God's law, but they just haven't hit bottom yet. They say, "Everything's cool; so far so good." You see, when we break God's laws, we don't really break them; they break us, because finally we hit the pavement. That's what Paul is talking about here. Man brings all this on himself, and that is the wrath of God.

So, we have seen that man is found guilty on three counts of godlessness. He is guilty because he suppresses and rejects the truth about God and because he replaces that truth with idolatry.

And Paul goes on to prove that man is likewise guilty on three counts of wickedness. The Apostle points out how God gave them over to three *kinds* of wickedness:

1. God gave them over to immoral passions (verses 24—25).

He gave them over "in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another." The history of the world confirms that idolatry inevitably leads to immorality. In this verse Paul does not tell us what kind of immorality he has in mind, except that it involved the degrading of their bodies with one another. Whether it was fornication, adultery, or homosexuality, we know that all illicit sexual activity degrades people's humanness, whereas sex within marriage ennobles and enriches life, just as God intended.

Paul's words here surely sound like the sexual revolution we see unfolding all around us today. We often say that America has lost its ability to blush. You know, some people want to go out and sow their wild oats, and then pray for a crop failure! They don't want to reap the results of their folly.

Notice in verse 25 how Paul tells us that these people "exchanged the truth of God for a lie." Interestingly enough, in the Greek it doesn't say "a lie," but "*the* lie." "They exchanged the truth of God for the lie." What is Paul talking about here? What is "the lie" that causes such horrendous problems in people's lives? Well, go back to Genesis 3:4-5 where we find the original lie that Satan told to Adam and Eve. Verse 2 says: "The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, "You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it or you will *die*.'" Look at verse 4 — here's "the lie" — "'You will not surely die,' the serpent said to the woman, 'for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'" Tell me, was the original temptation a temptation to be like the devil? No. It was a temptation to be like God! "The lie" is two things:

- (a) You can sin and get away with it. "You're not going to die."

(b) You can be your own god.

Isn't that exactly the same old lie that Satan is still fraudulently imposing on people today? "Do your own thing; be your own person; don't let anyone dictate to you how you are to live your life. After all, you are the master of your fate; you are the captain of your soul. You can get away with anything you want to do because, in fact, you *are* your own god." And so, Shirley MacLaine and the New Agers parade around as gods in their own right. They can do as they please because there are, after all, no ultimate or absolute standards of morality or of anything else!

2. God gave them over to indecent perversions (verses 26-27), what Paul calls "... shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another..." The Romans had become a corrupt society, and Rome was a city of unbridled lust. Fourteen of the first fifteen Roman emperors were homosexuals.

Now, the word "natural" (as in "natural relations") does not mean "what seems natural to me" (as some homosexual people would maintain). On the contrary, "natural" means "God's created order." To act "against nature" means to violate the order which God has established, whereas to act "according to nature" means to behave in accordance with the intention of the Creator. Moreover, the intention of the Creator means His original intention, as Genesis tells us and as Jesus confirmed. God created humankind male and female; God instituted marriage as a heterosexual union, and what God has thus united, we have no liberty to separate. Therefore, a gay or lesbian partnership (however loving and committed it may claim to be) is "against nature" and can never be regarded as a legitimate alternative to marriage. (See Genesis 2:19-24 and Matthew 19:4-6.)

People say, "Well, it's a sickness." I don't think so. It is a choice. Why would God condemn a sickness? He wouldn't. It's a learned behavior and it can be unlearned. In verse 27 it says that these homosexual men were inflamed with lust for one another..." That word "inflamed" in Greek literally means "burned out." That's what happens; they burn out. In any perversion, it goes on and on and cannot be satisfied, and there's a final burnout. God allows people to be involved in immoral passions and perversions, and so often it becomes a hell on earth.

And then Paul tells us that "they received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion." Paul does not specify what this penalty is, but we today know full well what it is.

3. God gave them over to irrational practices (verses 28-32). Look at verse 28:

"Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, He gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done." Paul is talking about a corrupted mind. He says, "People do things that are utterly irrational, things that shouldn't be done." Do you ever pick up the newspaper and say, "The world is insane; what *is* going on? — all of the senseless violence, the drug epidemic, the breakdown of family life, the lack of affection of parents for children and children for parents. It is because there is depravity in their minds.

Do you know that there are 21 different types of sin cataloged here? We might call this section of the chapter “SINERAMA”! And it all starts in the mind. The way you think affects the way you act. In Rome in those days a slave owner could kill his slave for any reason at all. The terror of the slave was that he was absolutely at the caprice of his master. The Emperor Augustus crucified a slave because he killed one of the Emperor’s pet quails. And Veditius Pollio flung a slave to the savage lampreys in his fish pond because he dropped and broke a crystal goblet.

If parents didn’t like a baby, they would simply leave it out in the street. Some mornings in Rome 30 to 40 babies would be picked up dead from exposure. Today this kind of behavior is perpetuated in child abuse of the most horrible kind, and abortion, especially this partial birth abortion of which we are hearing so much today. This is an obstetrical procedure so hideous and shocking that I could not bring myself to describe it to you in words. I can only say that paganism, in the most benighted area of the planet, could not devise and has not devised a practice so brutal and demonic. How any doctor with an ounce of conscience could bring himself to perform such an operation is beyond my ability to comprehend. You talk about a depraved and corrupted mind! Here is a demonstration of it in a doctor who has had perhaps eight years or more of medical training. “Since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, He gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.”

Now notice what verse 32 says: “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.” They applaud them. They stand and clap their hands when they see other transgressors committing the same sins that they commit. Why do they approve? Because misery loves company! “If I can get more people to do these things, then *I* won’t look so bad when I do them!” “Everybody’s doing it so why shouldn’t I?”

Are people entertained by watching evil today? Surely not. Would they watch senseless violence and sexual perversion? Well, just pick up the “TV Guide.” Even Academy awards are given to movies that promote promiscuity and violence.

Is there any hope? Thank God there is! Look at 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. “Don’t you know that the wicked [that is, those who live without any rules] will not inherit the Kingdom of God? Don’t be deceived; neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the Kingdom of God.” If you stop *there* it would be pretty depressing. But look at the next verse: “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” Now, that’s *good news!*

No person is hopeless. It doesn’t say, “God gave them *up*”; it says, “God gave them *over*.” He allowed them to reap the results of their own sin. But when you get so low that you have to reach up to touch bottom, then sometimes you get wise, and like the Prodigal, you think, “Hey, this isn’t the way to live. I will arise and go to my father!” There are lots of Christians today who weren’t saved until they hit bottom. And that’s why we sing “Amazing Grace”!

Now, how do you become a Christian in an ungodly world? The good news keeps getting better even as the bad news keeps getting worse.

(a) It's not imitation. You don't imitate the world and follow the world's standards.

(b) It's not isolation. You don't say, "Let's not work with or talk to non-Christians in case we become contaminated." We were not saved and then sent to live in a monastery. This isn't the answer.

(c) It's insulation. God can *insulate* you so that you remain pure even in the impure world in which God created you to live.

You can go out and catch a sea bass in the ocean. That sea bass has lived in the ocean its entire life. Now, the ocean is salt water. It's so salty, in fact, that if you drink some of it, it will nauseate you. Yet you take that fish and cook it, and before you eat it, you put salt on it! Why? Because it was *insulated*.

If God can put a fish in a salty ocean and keep it pure, He can also put you in a world where people are making their own choices and doing the wrong things, and still keep you pure and on target.

And surely that is something for which to thank the Lord Jesus Christ every day you live!

AMEN.