

p 19 WEEK 3: GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS IN HIS WRATH AGAINST SINNERS

Romans 1:18–3:20

The Place of the Passage

Paul has now proclaimed the power of the gospel to save believing sinners, whomever they may be (1:17). He has also asserted in the same breath that this power working through faith has strength enough both to justify once for all time and to sustain Christian living. “The righteous shall live by faith.” Now Paul transitions into supporting evidence in service of his assertions. The first place he must go is to the harsh reality of sin and human sinfulness. With masterful skill, Paul in 1:18–3:20 lays bare mankind’s falling short of God’s glory while maintaining that God’s glory remains nevertheless undiminished. He also begins to explore God’s righteous wrath toward sin. This sets the stage for Paul’s exploration in Romans 3–8 of God’s grace in justifying and sanctifying sinners.

The Big Picture

Paul reveals the extent of our disobedience against the righteous God.

p 20 Reflection and Discussion

Read through the complete passage for this study, Romans 1:18–3:20. Then review the shorter passages below and write your own notes on the following questions. (For further background, see the *ESV Study Bible*, pages 2158–2163; also available online at www.esvbible.org.)

1. The Unrighteousness of the Gentiles (1:18–32)

Romans 1:20 is reminiscent of Psalm 19:1—“The heavens declare the glory of God.” How do “the things that have been made” give clear evidence of God’s “eternal power and divine nature”?

Throughout the passage, Paul uses phrases like “God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts” (1:24), “God gave them up to dishonorable passions” (1:26), and “God gave them up to a debased mind” (1:28). What implications do such proclamations have for the idea of “free will”?

If sinners “suppress the truth” (1:18), how can Paul say that the truth is “clearly perceived” (1:20)?

p 21 In this passage, Paul is revealing that even the irreligious—in this case, classified as Gentiles, or “non-Jews”—are aware of a holy standard. What are some ways in which even those who deny God demonstrate a tacit awareness of moral absolutes?

2. The Unrighteousness of the Jews (2:1–3:8)

Now Paul begins to focus more narrowly on those inside the religious community. It’s not just “those people out there” who are sinners, but “we insiders” too. Why does Paul say that when we judge others, we condemn ourselves (2:1)?

If tribulation will come to every evildoer, first to Jews and then to Greeks (2:9), and peace to everyone who does good, first to Jews and then to Greeks (v. 10), how can Paul say God shows no partiality (v. 11)?

In Romans 2:12–14 Paul *appears* to say that obedience will justify Gentiles. When we interpret any biblical text, we have to keep it in its context. How does 2:15–29 help to clarify what Paul is saying?

p 22 According to Romans 3:1–2, what advantage do Jews have?

3. The Unrighteousness of All People (3:9–20)

We are accustomed to speaking of unbelievers as “seekers.” There is indeed a sense in which all people are seeking God—in the sense that they are seeking to satisfy their need for God with all sorts of things that aren’t God. But what does Paul (quoting Ps. 14:1–3) mean when he says “no one seeks for God” (Rom. 3:11)?

How does Romans 3:18 relate to 3:11?

According to Romans 3:20, what might we call the “catch-22”—both the benefit and the detriment—of the works of the law?

p 23 Read through the following three sections on *Gospel Glimpses*, *Whole-Bible Connections*, and *Theological Soundings*. Then take time to reflect on the *Personal Implications* these sections may have for your walk with the Lord.

Gospel Glimpses

THE GOSPEL MAKES US “NATURAL.” In Romans 1:26–27, Paul comments on the sinfulness of homosexuality. He calls heterosexual relations “natural” and calls deviation from this “contrary to nature” and “shameless.” Here Paul is highlighting how the inward bent of sin creates such dysfunction and disorder that we defy the sovereign lordship of Christ, pursuing abnormal and unnatural relations as if they were natural and normal. Elsewhere Paul writes that before salvation we “lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind” (Eph. 2:3). In this same pattern, Jude writes that apart from Christ sinners will be “destroyed by all that they, like unreasoning animals, understand instinctively” (Jude 10). The corollary to this truth is that after salvation, even as we become more and more conformed to the image of Christ, we are also becoming more and more our true selves. As the fruit of the Spirit increases in us, God restores order within us. Our minds are renewed (Rom. 12:2). We learn to do the natural thing spiritually and the spiritual thing naturally.

GOD’S KINDNESS LEADS YOU TO REPENTANCE. In yet another wonderful affirmation of where the source of power to change is found, Paul reminds us in Romans 2:4 that “God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance.” Not his law, not his berating, not his exasperation or his cajoling. His kindness! It is grace, that trains us to renounce ungodliness (Titus 2:11–12).

SPIRIT-WROUGHT INCLUSION. In Romans 2:29 Paul writes, “But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.” No act of obedience or merit, no matter how religious, earns us favor with God. Nothing we can do will earn us inclusion in God’s good graces. God’s good graces grant us inclusion! And so the identifying marker is not outward manifestations, which as in the case of the Pharisees may belie the deadness inside, but rather the spiritual work that takes place in the heart. God’s people are those in whom his Spirit resides, applying the atoning work of Christ and sanctifying³ believers over time. By virtue of this action, God is saving both Jews and non-Jews, however irreligious they may at first be.

p 24 Whole-Bible Connections

IDOLATRY. Paul shows us that the fundamental problem of human existence is the worship of false gods. Idolatry is the root of sin. He outlines it this way: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.... They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!” (Rom. 1:22–23, 25). Human beings are never *not* worshipping. John Calvin has said that our hearts are “idol factories,” and the story of Israel in the Old Testament certainly bears this out, as God’s people continually struggle to trust the Lord but again and again lapse into idolatry.

DIVINE SOVEREIGNTY. There are many provocative claims in Paul’s letter to the Romans, right from the start. Consider these verses from Romans 1: “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity” (v. 24); “For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions” (v. 26); and “God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (v. 28). God is “giving up” unrepentant sinners to their sin. In allowing sin to persist and harden in a person’s heart, God maintains his sovereignty in a way that does not negate human responsibility. One of the clearest places we see this is in God’s dealing with Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. Several times we read that Pharaoh hardened his heart (Ex. 8:15, 32), but we also read that *God* hardened Pharaoh’s heart (Ex. 4:21, 7:3, 9:12). So which was it? In the mystery of God’s sovereignty and human responsibility, we learn that in effect the answer is “both.” Sinners are responsible for their hard hearts, yet God is sovereign over human activity.

Theological Soundings

GENERAL REVELATION. Romans 1:19–20 sounds very similar to Psalm 19:1. The theological concept at work there is commonly called the doctrine of “general revelation.” This idea, drawn from the Scriptures, is that God effectively reveals himself in the created world. The doctrine of general revelation does not claim that everything we need to know about God and his gospel in Christ is intelligible from the natural world—gospel knowledge necessitates what is called “special revelation,” which refers to God’s Word in the flesh (Jesus) and God’s Word written down (the Bible). General revelation does mean, however, that there is enough of God’s glory revealed in creation to leave sinners “without excuse” for their idolatry and unbelief (1:20).

“OBEY THE TRUTH.” Romans 2:6–8 posits another counterintuitive truth. The truth of the gospel is not law or instructions or advice. It is news. It is [p 25](#) not essentially something to obey but something to believe. Yet here Paul uses the curious phrase “obey the truth.” The phrase “obey the gospel” appears elsewhere in the Scriptures (Rom. 10:16; 2 Thess. 1:8; 1 Pet. 4:17). What is meant here? Perhaps this: the first thing to *do* is to keep foremost in our minds that the saving work is already *done*. Let us obey—let us *heed*—that truth. Let us believe and live in a way that demonstrates that we believe the gospel is true.

NATURAL LAW. In Romans 2:12–16, Paul indicts all people under the reality of indwelling sin. The special revelation of God’s commandments explicitly reveals what is right and what is wrong. We hear clearly in the law what honors God and commends his holiness. And yet even those without the law have some awareness of right and wrong. We call this reality “natural law” because it tells us that even unbelievers are fundamentally and innately aware of justice, fairness, transgression, and morality.

Personal Implications

Take time to reflect on the implications of Romans 1:18–3:20 for your own life today. Make notes below on the personal implications for your walk with the Lord of (1) the *Gospel Glimpses*, (2) the *Whole-Bible Connections*, (3) the *Theological Soundings*, and (4) this passage as a whole.

1. Gospel Glimpses

2. Whole-Bible Connections

p 26 3. Theological Soundings

4. Romans 1:18–3:20

As You Finish This Unit ...

Take a moment to ask for the Lord's blessing and help as you continue in this study of Romans. And take a moment also to look back through this unit of study, to reflect on some key things that the Lord may be teaching you.