

Week Two: (Romans 1:18-32)

Key Verse

“For though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or show gratitude. Instead, their thinking became worthless, and their senseless hearts were darkened.” - Romans 1:21 (CSB)

Key Principles

- God brings judgment against all unrighteousness and it is right for him to do this.
- Ignoring God prompts him to give people over to all sorts of problems and sins.
- The God of the gospel cannot be truly glorious to us without a profound understanding of our real problem.
- Those who have been forgiven much will demonstrate great love in return.

Read

There are a few recurring themes throughout the entire book of Romans that Paul brings up in the first three chapters:

- The profound equality that all of humankind shares in the eyes of God.
- God’s righteous judgment on all those who choose to worship creation over Creator.
- The sharp contrast between righteousness and unrighteousness.

As to the third theme, Paul ends Romans 1:17 with the sentence, “The righteous shall live by faith.” This quotation, referring to Habakkuk 2:4, raises the topic of righteousness, a recurring theme in Romans that Paul often uses to describe both God and faithful people who are in right-standing with God. A basic definition of righteous is morally right or virtuous.

Righteousness, then, is an attribute, a characteristic, and a state of being—the extent to which one is morally right or virtuous. For example, when Paul mentions God’s righteousness, he is often describing how God is faithful, true, and just (Romans 3:1–8). Other times, Paul is talking about how God’s righteousness is a gift that he has given believers. Through Christ, we get to claim his righteousness, his right-standing with God, as our own. What an amazing gift! Throughout your reading, take note of how Paul uses the word “righteousness” and who it describes.

In Romans 1–3, Paul begins his explanation of righteousness by describing what righteousness is not. In other words, in order to help us understand how righteousness works, Paul spends the next few chapters showing how unrighteousness works. And just like you would imagine, it is the opposite of all that is faithful, true, and just.

The first thing we need to know is that God judges unrighteousness. Romans 1:18 carries the message that God is currently against all unrighteousness, will actively thwart it in the present, and will destroy it completely in the future. At first glance, any of us might be tempted to excuse ourselves from being labeled “unrighteous.” After all, the description of unrighteousness in Romans 1:18–32 lists some of the worst sins and behaviors we could imagine. Yet Paul explains in Romans 1:18–32, that God’s wrath and judgment fall upon those who practice any of this unrighteousness. Let that idea sink in. When any of us do just one unrighteous act or think one unrighteous thought, we deserve to die (1:32). This means that all of us are guilty of practicing unrighteousness and deserve God’s judgment. And we deserve God’s judgment because God is perfectly righteous, so any amount of unrighteousness is unacceptable for our righteous God.

But how can this be? How did we get like this? Did we really become slaves to all sorts of evil desires? First, God has made himself known through creation, so that we would worship him (1:19–20). All of us have foolishly worshiped creation instead of the Creator and now our hearts are darkened because of our rebellion (1:21). Though God has given us his matchless glory, we ignored him and settled for worshiping idols (1:23). Then, we started practicing all sorts of evil and unrighteous behavior, and we gave approval to those who did the same (1:32). It is a scary progression and one that we all are equally guilty of following apart from God's grace in our lives.

Paul repeatedly states that because God is a good and righteous God, he must judge all unrighteousness. They dishonored God, so he, in turn, dishonored their bodies by delivering them over to corrupt desires (1:21–24). They exchanged God for images and exchanged his truth for a lie. Thus, God gives them over to exchange their natural desires for unnatural ones (1:23–27). And because they did not think it worthwhile to acknowledge God, God delivered them over to a corrupt—literally translated as disacknowledged—mind (1:28). Every form of sin is met with an appropriate righteous judgment from God. Consider the sins listed in this section and how they are not only the cause of God's judgment but also the evidence of God's judgment on the world.

This means that the more we make it our practice to ignore God, the more we prompt God to give us over to different forms of unrighteousness. For example, when we sin with our words and lash out in sinful anger and bitterness against another person, God often gives us over to the consequence of friction in the relationship. Each of us can probably think of other practical examples in our own lives and communities. The seriousness of our unrighteousness and God's wrath can be seen in an illustration from 20th-century British author and professor C.S. Lewis. According to Lewis, God's judgment is not about a vindictive, malicious God tormenting innocent people. Instead, as Lewis metaphorically stated, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in hell choose it."¹ As we look around at unrighteousness in our world, and more importantly, our own lives, we should be sobered by the seriousness of God's righteous wrath.

In Romans, God does not offer us a superficial diagnosis of our problem. He mercifully teaches us that our deepest problems concern sin and wrath. All of us are sinful in rejecting God, and God himself has righteous wrath against us. Knowing the true nature of our problem will help us cherish God's kindness in the gospel. Romans 1:18–32 lays out the things that God must overcome in order to save us. He must remain righteous and true to himself, yet forgive and transform sinners. Can a good and righteous God ever simply let sinners walk away free? If God is righteous, he must offer exact retribution. Christ would take on every bit of the righteous wrath of God for those that would trust in him. What kind of God would do such a thing? The God of the gospel cannot be truly glorious to us without a profound understanding of our real problem.

Hopefully, taking a closer look at what happens to the unrighteous makes us realize the terrible and undesirable outcomes of consistently choosing unrighteousness. Paul explains that we are all equally lost without God's grace and we all have a desperate need for God's glorious gospel. Understanding this deep need for a Savior will help us appreciate how much Christ has done to save us. As Jesus himself explains, those who have been forgiven much will demonstrate great love in return; "but the one who has been forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). Consider this week how dark our paths were without Christ, how much God has given us in Christ, and how much we still need God's grace.

Study Guide

1. What words does Paul use to describe the actions of unrighteous people in Romans 1:18–32? What words does he use to describe God’s actions? Do you see any similarities?
2. How are humankind’s actions related to God’s actions in Romans 1:18–32?
3. From what we know so far in Romans 1, contrast how Romans 1:18–32 describes an unrighteous person with what we might assume about a righteous person. Share your reflections with your small group.
4. How do people “suppress the truth” (1:18) of God by what they do and what they do not do?
5. Paul repeats three times in Romans 1:18–32 that God “gave them up” or “delivered them over” (1:24, 26, 28). What do these phrases tell us about God and about ourselves? What is Paul emphasizing through this repetition?
6. What does it mean to be “without excuse” (1:20) and why is this important for how anyone understands the gospel?
7. What is the overall point Paul is trying to make in Romans 1:18–32? How does this relate to what Paul said in Romans 1:1–17?