

Lesson 18 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 1:18, Continued

Romans 1:18 — For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

Last week we looked at what the Bible tells us about the wrath of God. Our next question is what verse 18 means when it tells us that God's wrath is revealed. And I think it is worth spending some extra time on this question because it will help us with the remainder of this first chapter.

How is the wrath of God revealed?

Is this revealed wrath of God the final day of judgment? Yes, at least in part. There is a sense in which the wrath of God is coming.

Colossians 3:6 — On account of these the wrath of God is coming.

And Paul will refer to the day of wrath in Romans 2:5. So, yes, I think the wrath of God here in verse 18 **includes** that final day, but I do not think we should limit the wrath of God here in verse 18 to just that final day of wrath.

Why not? Because the verb here is in the present tense — this wrath of God **is being** revealed. I think there must be some way in which the wrath of God was being revealed to the people of Paul's day. But how? I think this first chapter of Romans answers that question.

Consider some of the things we will see in our study of Romans 1:

- **Romans 1:24** — Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.
- **Romans 1:26** — For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions.
- **Romans 1:27** — Men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.
- **Romans 1:28** — And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

How is the wrath of God revealed? I think Paul answers that question over and over again in this first chapter of Romans. God's wrath is revealed when God gives that person up.

I don't think we can conclude that is the only way God's wrath is revealed, but I do think we can conclude that it is one way in which God's wrath is revealed. And that way was not limited to the first century — God is still giving people up today.

We will look much more closely at that phrase "God gave them up" when we get to verse 24, but for now I think we can say that it is not anything you ever want to be said about yourself! In fact, I cannot think of anything worse than being given up by God! And yet in this first chapter we see God doing that three times. We don't ever want to be in that group!

And yet, absent the gospel, everyone is in that group. And for those who reject the gospel, that is all they have in their future — being given up by God!

Whether it happens in this life or after this life, or both, it will happen to everyone who is lost. God will give them up. The difference is that, in this life, there is an opportunity for repentance, but that will no longer be true after the final day of wrath when God finally gives up those who rejected the gospel of Christ.

We should note that elsewhere Paul tells us that this process of being given up is a two-way street — God gives them up, but they also give themselves up.

Ephesians 4:18-19 — They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart. They have become callous and **have given themselves up** to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

People today want to decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong, and they see that as freedom — but God sees that as a punishment!

Psalm 81:11-12 — But my people did not listen to my voice; Israel would not submit to me. **So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts, to follow their own counsels.**

And, in fact, that desire to decide for ourselves what is right and what is wrong was the same desire that was behind the first temptation.

Genesis 3:5 — For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

And what tempted Eve in Genesis 3 is still tempting people today — they want to be like God. They want to be the one who determines what is good and what is evil.

And that desire is why the world has turned upside down today — with society telling us that sin is right and that God's word is wrong. But, again, there is nothing new in that — it was prophesied long ago.

Isaiah 5:20-21 — Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter! Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes, and shrewd in their own sight!

And what happens when someone reaches such a state? What happens when someone is so far sold into sin that their world flips completely over? What happens when someone calls evil good and good evil? I think what happens is that God gives them up. We are about to read all about such people in this first chapter of Romans, and three times God will tell us that he gave them up.

Are we surprised by any of this? When we read these descriptions do we wonder whether there are any such people around today? People so steeped in sin that God has given them up? I think we all know they haven't gone anywhere. They are still with us today. I suspect we all know such people.

But if God has given them up, then doesn't that mean they are too far gone to ever turn back to God? No, not at all. It does not mean that. It

means just the opposite. I think God gives them up so that they will finally see their degraded condition and turn to God. Paul describes such people in 1 Corinthians 6:11 — “such were some of you.” And don’t we see a beautiful example of that in Luke 15?

Luke 15:11-17 — And he said, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, **who sent him into his fields to feed pigs**. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything. **But when he came to himself...**”

Why did the prodigal son return to his father? Wasn’t it because of that pig pen? Wasn’t that why he came to himself?

And, yes, his father gave him up. He watched for the prodigal to return, and he ran to meet him when he did, but the Father did not run after his son as he walked away from him down that road. The father gave him up. He let him go. And he went. And he sank down to the depths of degradation in that pig pen.

Did you ever think how this parable would have ended if that younger son had invested that money, had settled down in that far country, had raised a family there, and had become prosperous in his new life away from home? Would that son have ever returned to his father?

Most often, the worst present-day punishment of sin comes from the sin itself. That sin starts out looking so alluring, but that lure comes with a hook — and that hook is something we endure right here and right now in this life.

- That one drink comes with a hook — it ruins your health.
- That brief flirtation comes with a hook — it ruins your marriage.
- That extra dollar comes with a hook — it ruins your sleep.
- That harmless lie comes with a hook — it ruins your reputation.
- That next click comes with a hook — it ruins your purity.
- That mindless scrolling comes with a hook — it ruins your contentment.
- That enjoyable escape comes with a hook — it ruins your freedom.

Just this once and no more, we say to ourselves about some sin. But we very soon become a slave to that sin. Inch by inch, we stray more and more — until suddenly we find ourselves feeding those pigs. That is how sin works — it is born out of allurement and enticement, but it ends with death.

James 1:14-15 — But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.

But why does God do this? Why does God give people up?

I think that the key to answering that question is to see that the very first thing that God wants from us is our attention. God wants us to listen to him. Later, Paul will tell us that faith comes from hearing — and so the first step to God involves our ears! We must listen to him. We must give God our attention.

And it is much easier to get someone's attention when that person needs something from us. I think that is why God gives people up. I think that is why the father let the prodigal son go far away. That son would not listen to his father when he was in need of nothing, but that same son opened those ears when he found himself in need of everything.

C.S. Lewis: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

I think God gives people up as the last resort to awaken them to their condition. It worked with the prodigal son! But sadly, for many, it does not work. They stay right there in that pig pen, mired in their rebellion against Christ. But, even then, God is watching for them to return from that far country before it is too late.

And if we think that God gives people up only for sins of the flesh, we need to look at another example — one that involved sins of the spirit. I think God also gave up the Pharisees.

Jesus never said a word even to the most degraded sinner that would cause that person to despise themselves or to make them think that Christ despised them. But to the Pharisees, at least on the surface, it seems that Jesus did just that.

Matthew 23:33 — You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

How strange those words sound when we compare them with what Jesus said to the woman caught up in adultery or to the woman of the well in Samaria who is living in sin or to the rich young ruler who turned his back on Christ. Jesus did not even speak to Satan the way he spoke to the Pharisees.

Why? Was it because Jesus wanted the Pharisees to be lost? No, we know that was not true. Jesus came to seek and save the Pharisees, along with every other sinner.

I think Jesus spoke to the Pharisees that way because Jesus knew that was the only way to ever reach them. They needed to wake up to their condition — they thought they were closer and more pleasing to God than anyone — but the opposite was true. What they needed more than anything was a spiritual alarm clock to awaken them to their true condition — and so that is what Jesus gave them. I think Jesus was trying to rouse them from their spiritual stupor.

And how did Jesus do that? I think he gave them up. I think that is what we see in Matthew 23. But in giving them up, I think Jesus was trying to reach them — not turn his back on them.

After all, if God wanted the Pharisees in Matthew 23 and the sinners in Romans 1 to be lost, then God didn't need to give them up. Why not? Because they were already lost. I think that fact alone is enough for us to know that this process of giving up has another purpose — not to send someone to Hell, but a last ditch effort to reach someone who

is already far along on that road and to wake them up to their true condition and convince them to leave that pig pen while they can.

In short, God gives people up in this life because he loves them and because he wants them to be saved — because he wants them to avoid being given up in the next life. That is what John 3:16 tells us about everything that God is doing. It is not God's will that anyone should perish (2 Peter 3:9).

Is that our will? Or when we read these descriptions in Romans 1 are we just thinking good riddance? That is not what God is thinking. God is looking down that road from the far country. Are we?

Who are the “men” being described in verse 18 - are they all people or are they just the Gentiles?

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of whom? Who are the “men” in that verse?

I think we have two choices. Either verse 18 is directed to all people, or verse 18 is directed only to the Gentiles.

Why only those two choices? Because there is really no doubt that most of the remainder of chapter 1 is directed only to the Gentiles. The only question is whether this first verse in the section has a larger focus.

Nearly all commentaries agree that Paul is describing the Gentiles and not the Jews at the end of the first chapter. Why? Several reasons:

- Paul will describe their rejection of the knowledge of God available through creation (nature), rather than through special revelation (Scripture).
- The descriptions in these verses will mirror the traditional arguments used by the Jews to critique the Gentile world.
- The specific sins highlighted by Paul such as idolatry and sexual immorality were associated almost exclusively with Gentiles in the mind of any first-century Jew.
- Verse 32 condemns those who “approve” of such sins. While the Jews might have committed such sins, they would never have endorsed or approved of such sins.

But if all of that is true, then why didn't Paul tell us very plainly that he was talking only to the Gentiles here? I think the answer to that question will also answer our current question — whether the “men” in verse 18 are all people or just the Gentiles.

All people or just the Gentiles? The answer, I think, is yes! We can see it either way here in verse 18. And I think that ambiguity was intentional.

Paul does not use the word “ethnos” that we saw earlier in this same chapter and that very often means Gentiles or Gentile nations. Instead, here in verse 18, Paul uses the word “anthropos,” which just means people.

Why that word? I think it is because Paul is setting a trap! Paul knows that, no matter what word he used in verse 18, the Jews will be thinking about those awful Gentiles — and especially so as this description

proceeds. But Paul will spring his trap when he turns to the Jews in chapter 2.

Romans 2:1 — Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, **because you, the judge, practice the very same things.**

As for how the Jews were guilty of these “same things,” let’s leave that question for chapter 2. For now all we need to know is that they were guilty of the same things. And when we understand that fact, it puts the end of chapter 1 in a totally different light! Suddenly, we see that chapter 1 does in fact apply to all mankind. The Gentiles had not cornered the market on sin! As Paul will soon tell us, **all have sinned!**

Is there a difference between ungodliness and unrighteousness?

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all **ungodliness** and **unrighteousness** of men, who by their **unrighteousness** suppress the truth.”

Is there some distinction here between ungodliness and unrighteousness? And why is it that only the unrighteous are said to suppress the truth? Don’t the ungodly also do that?

A popular and possibly correct view is that Paul is using this phrase to describe people who disobey all ten of the ten commandments. In that case, the word “ungodliness” would refer to the commandments involving sins against God, and “unrighteousness” would refer to the commandments involving sins against other people.

If that is the explanation, then again that would fit in well with Paul’s rhetorical strategy. When Paul addressed people who disobey every

commandment of God, the Jews would all immediately think of the Gentiles. But then in the next chapter, Paul will say this to the Jews:

Romans 2:21-22 — You then who teach others, do you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? You who say that one must not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples?

Again, the Gentiles did not have a monopoly on sin. The Jews were guilty of breaking those same commandments. And worse — the Jews, unlike the Gentiles, had been given those commandments!

I like that view, but the answer could be simpler — Paul may be using these two words as synonyms. And that view may be suggested by the language itself — not **all** ungodliness and **all** unrighteousness, but “**all** ungodliness and unrighteousness,” which might suggest that we should treat those two terms as a single description. And that view would also explain why Paul mentions only the unrighteous at the end of the verse.

How do the unrighteous suppress the truth?

Perhaps we should first ask the same question Pilate asked: **what is truth?** How would Paul answer that question?

The Handout for Lesson 18 shows every appearance of the word “truth” in the ESV translation of Paul’s epistles. What can we learn about “truth” from Paul’s use of that word? What is the truth about the truth?

The first thing we learn from the verses on the Handout is that many people do not have the right view about the truth.

They suppress the truth, they exchange the truth for a lie, they do not obey the truth, they are against the truth, their conduct is not in step with the truth, they refuse to love the truth, they do not believe the truth, they are deprived of the truth, they have swerved from the truth, they oppose the truth, and they turn away from listening to the truth.

Each of those descriptions comes from a verse shown on the Handout. But we also learn about the right view of the truth from the verses on the Handout.

The truth must be obeyed, the gospel is the truth, we must hear the word of truth, we must speak the truth in love, we must proclaim the truth even if we make enemies by doing so, we must wear the belt of truth, we must come to the knowledge of the truth, we must understand that the church is the pillar and buttress of the truth, and we must rightly handle the word of truth. Again, each of those descriptions comes from a verse shown on the Handout.

I think what the Handout is showing us is that truth is the great divider. Do we know the truth or not? Do we believe the truth or not? Do we obey the truth or not? Do we speak the truth or not? Do we live the truth or not?

What we decide about truth is the most important decision we will ever make! Jesus says that he is the truth — what do I say? I will never make a more important decision than that one. The sheep say one thing; the goats say something else. And ultimately there are no groups other than just those two.

Here in verse 18 we find people who made the wrong choice when they came face to face with truth. Rather than obeying it, they suppressed it.

What is this truth in verse 18 that is being suppressed by the unrighteous? I think verse 19 (which begins with the word “for”) will answer that question, so let’s hold off on that question for now.

Instead, let’s ask how truth in general is suppressed by the unrighteous. I think we can answer that question with a single word: confusion.

Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 14:33 that “God is not a God of confusion,” but we see a great deal of confusion in this world. If it is not from God, then from whom?

And, of course, we know the answer to that question — Satan is the great confuser. When we first meet him, what is he doing? He is confusing Eve. He is twisting the word of God to make her believe that God said the opposite of what he really said.

Peter tells us in 2 Peter 3:16 that some people were twisting what Paul had written. The specific things that Peter had in mind were the things Paul had written that were hard to understand, but I think before we get to the end of this chapter we will meet some people who also twist the things Paul wrote that are very easy to understand.

But why? Why do people suppress the truth? They suppress the truth because they hate the truth. I am reminded of a favorite quote by George Orwell: “The further a society drifts from the truth the more it will hate those that speak it.”

The unrighteous suppress the truth because they hate the truth — and don't we see that all around us today? People who hate the truth? People who gnash their teeth and cover their ears when they hear the truth from God's word about gender and about their sinful lifestyles?

Amos 5:10 — ...They abhor him who speaks the truth.

John 3:20 — For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.

John 15:18 — If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you.

We should not be worried when the world hates us. What should worry us instead is if the world has only good things to say about us.

Luke 6:26 — Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

Romans 1:19

Romans 1:19 — For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.

Before we look at whatever questions we may have about verse 19, let's first answer our remaining question about verse 18. We had asked what the truth was that was being suppressed in that verse, and we can now answer that question.

Verse 19 begins with the word "for," which tells us that verse 19 is an explanation of verse 18. But what is being explained?

Let's look at that question from the perspective of verse 18 — after having read that verse, what question might we have? I think the most likely question is what truth. And I think we would especially have that question if we thought that Paul was talking to only the Gentiles here.

What truth did the Gentiles have? Moses had not given them the law. Had the Gentiles received the truth some other way? If so, how and what truth? If not, how could they suppress something they did not have?

Verse 19 answers all of those questions. Verse 19 tells us that the Gentiles had in fact been given truth about God. In fact, everyone on earth had been given truth about God.

And what was that truth? It was what can be known about God. And who had given this truth to them? God himself had made it plain to them by showing it to them. As for what and how, let's wait until we get to verse 20, which will further explain verse 19.

But for now, I think we can say that this truth about God is the truth that was being suppressed in verse 18. There was something that they all knew about God, but that they did not want to believe. There was some truth about God that had been made plain to them, but that they all hated. There was some truth about God that God had shown them, but that they twisted and distorted and hindered.

But how had they done these things? Why had they done these things? And what is this plain truth about God that had been shown to them by God himself? All good questions — and all questions that we will look at when we get to verse 20.

But before we get to verse 20, let's pause and notice something really interesting about verse 19.

We know that the Bible is inspired (literally, breathed out) by God. It is not the human authors who were inspired, but rather the words that they wrote that were inspired. But how did inspiration work? When we read the Bible, I think we can quickly and easily discern two facts about inspiration — inspiration was a miracle, and inspiration was not dictation.

God miraculously used human authors to give us his word, but those human authors were intimately involved in the process. They were not just taking dictation like Tertius took dictation from Paul in writing this letter to the Romans.

How do we know that for sure? Many ways. For starters, the grammar is different. Some writers were not as proficient in Greek as others were. And we can also see the different background of the authors — Paul, for example, was trained in rhetoric and logic.

Also, the writers themselves tell us that they were not just taking dictation. Luke begins his gospel account by telling Theophilus that he had followed all things closely for some time past. Why would that matter if Luke was just taking dictation?

And Luke also tells us that he had talked to eyewitnesses. Again, why would that matter if Luke was just taking dictation? Does any of that matter with regard to Tertius? If not, then why would it matter for Luke or Paul if they like Tertius were just taking down dictation?

And so we have two truths about inspiration — first, every word and every letter was breathed out by God, and second, the human authors

who wrote down those words and letters were not just taking dictation.

Why do I bring this up here? Because I think there is something about verse 19 that really drives home this point about inspiration.

When someone takes dictation, all they need to know are the words that they are supposed to write down. They listen to the speaker, and they write down what they hear. They don't open any books; they don't research anything; they just listen and write.

But is that what we see here? When Paul quoted Habakkuk in verse 17, did he have a scroll open in front of him? I think he did. And verse 19 is the reason why I think he did. And this was something I found very much by accident.

“For what can be known about God is plain to them.” Is there an Old Testament verse that comes to mind when you hear that statement? There was for me — it was a verse about something being so plain that you could read it while running! I remembered that verse, but I didn't remember where it was. So I did some searching, and I found it.

Habakkuk 2:2 — And the LORD answered me: “Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it.”

Did you catch that citation? The verse I was looking for turned out to be just two verses earlier than Habakkuk 2:4, which is the verse that Paul just quoted two verses earlier than Romans 1:19!

I don't think that is a coincidence. I think Paul had his scroll of Habakkuk open in front of him when he wanted to explain how God

shows things to us. And I think that, in breathing out his words in Romans, God used Paul's knowledge of the words that God had breathed out earlier in Habakkuk.