

BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

By Dr. Stephen G. Hatfield
Pastor, First Baptist Church
Lewisville, Texas

Studies in Romans: A Gospel-Centered Worldview

Lesson Two

Exchanging God's Truth for a Lie

Focal Text

Romans 1:18-32

Background

Romans 1:18-32

Main Idea

Ignoring God allows sin to flourish.

Question to Explore

What are the causes and results of ignoring God?

Quick Read

Sin flourishes when we live life without God. God will allow us to ignore him, but we must live with the natural consequences.

Introduction

Have you heard any of the jokes about the good news and the bad news?

I will be gracious and tell them on myself (and other ministers as well).¹

Good News: Church attendance rose dramatically the last three weeks.

Bad News: You were on vacation.

Good News: The Women's Sunday School Class voted to send you a get-well card.

Bad News: The vote passed by 31-30.

Good News: The Personnel Committee accepted your job description the way you wrote it.

Bad News: They were so inspired by it, they also formed a search committee to find someone capable of filling the position.

Good News: You finally found a music minister who approaches things exactly the same way you do.

Bad News: The choir quit.

Good News: The women's church softball team finally won a game.

Bad News: They beat your men's softball team.

Good News: The trustees finally voted to add more church parking.

Bad News: They are going to blacktop the front lawn of your parsonage.

Paul introduced his major point in the opening verses of the Book of Romans. He developed God's great plan of salvation for every person who would receive his gift of grace (1:1-17).

This is indeed good news. But Paul postponed his full explanation of this good news until 3:21. Before he could give us the good news, he had to deliver the bad news found in 1:18-32. To say this week's passage contains the bad news is an understatement. Paul knew before any of us could accept the good news of the gospel, we must understand our need for salvation. We all are separated from God by sin and darkness. Paul explained that God has revealed himself to all of his creation, but all of us have rejected his revelation.

Commentary

We are utilizing J. W. MacGorman's outline of Romans.²

Salutation (1:1-17)

Paul, a Servant of Jesus Christ (1:1-7)

Thanksgiving and Prayer Request (1:8-15)

Theme: the Righteousness of God (1:16-17)

The Sinfulness of Men (1:18-3:20)

Pagan Lostness (1:18-32)

Both Gentiles and Jews have had the opportunity to know and follow God's will. Both have turned away and stand before God "without excuse" (1:20). Paul described the lostness of the Gentiles in 1:18-32. Next, he took up the lost condition of Jews in 2:1-3:8. Paul then summarized the sin of all mankind—Gentile and Jew alike (3:9-20).

God's Revelation (1:18-20)

1:18-19. Compare divine wrath to human anger. God's wrath is a holy, justified reaction to those things that are contrary to his character and will. Human anger is a vengeful and irrational burst of emotion, many times unjustified. Wrath is the response to mankind's rejection of God's revelation, to even those who may not have ever heard of Jesus.

1:20. The concept of "general revelation" comes into play here. This is the revelation of God to all people, at all times, and in all places that proves God exists and he is intelligent, powerful, and transcendent. An Old Testament example is found in the Psalms: "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1).

Like Psalm 19, Romans 1:20 teaches God's eternal power and divine nature are "clearly seen being understood through what has been made," so there is no excuse for denying these facts.

Illustration: Many people have a hard time accepting the possibility God can feel any wrath. They think God is all about love and nothing else. A close reading of the Bible tells us that to reject God's love is to accept God's punishment. The other side of the coin of love is wrath. The options before God are acceptance or rejection. God is not angry and out to punish anyone. But when people choose to turn against God, he gives people over to themselves. This is God's wrath. We are so made in his image that we are truly human only when free to affirm or deny God, to accept or reject his presence and will for our lives.³

Pagan Response (1:21-23)

Joshua reviewed Israel's history when he addressed the nation before he stepped away from his position of leadership. He recounted the many victories God had given the people as they marched through the land of promise. When I read these words, one phrase Joshua uttered jumps off the page: "...choose for yourselves today whom you will serve:..." (Joshua 24:15).

I believe we "serve" the things we "choose." We were born to serve something or someone. It's in our DNA. If you choose to make the priority of your life making as much money as you possibly can, then your life's focus and energies will be on riches. You will serve your choice. If you choose to brood over past hurts and attacks, then bitterness will become your god. Likewise, if you choose obedience to God as the goal of your life, then you will serve the God who created you and knows what is best for your life.

Rejection of God leads to idolatry. They "exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures" (1:23). The pagan world (Gentiles) chose to worship the creation instead of the Creator.

If one rejects God, then who or what does one serve? In many cases, the best and only choice is to be one's own god. Paul described idolaters as "futile in their speculations" and "fools." To grab deity and claim it as your own is nothing more than arrogance and presumption. J. W. MacGorman put it this way: "The god mask is the phoniest of all the masks that men wear."⁴

God's Judgment (1:24-32)

1:24-25. God allowed man's sinful choices to produce their inevitable consequences. The Israelites serve as a classic example of exchanging "the truth of God for a lie" (1:25). In Exodus 32, when Moses climbed Mt. Sinai to receive the Law, the people grew restless and fashioned a golden calf. When they put the finishing touches on the idol, the people proclaimed, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4).

1:26-27. When man becomes his own god and rejects the revelation of God, the results are tragic and disastrous. God gave them over to sexual immorality, both heterosexual (1:24) and homosexual (1:26-27). R. Kent Hughes described this situation as follows: "God allows men and women to go as far down as they desire to go. His wrath is shown in the removal of his restraining power."⁵

The reading of these verses in the Greek New Testament is explicit. Instead of "men with men" and "women with women," it reads "male with male" and "female with female." Why does Paul single out homosexual sin to describe the depth of human depravity? Hughes concludes Paul put it at the top of his list because homosexuality is "so obviously unnatural, and therefore automatically underlines the extent to which sin takes mankind."⁶ The condemnation of homosexuality is clearly grounded in the Old Testament (Genesis 19:1-28; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13 and Deuteronomy 23:17-18).

In light of recent events in our nation, the issue of sexual orientation is now a hot button topic. Sexual sins of perversion or inversion are not unpardonable. There is only one sin for which there is no forgiveness—the rejection of Jesus in one's life.

Keep in mind that sin is sin. The Bible does not categorize sins under headings of "bad to worst." Just because political parties have elevated certain "sins" to become part of the party platform it does not change the fact that all sin is an affront to God. The gossip of a pious church member is just as much a sin as these "banner sins" we have elevated above all others. And Paul will deal with these other sins in his list below.

1:28. Mankind did not acknowledge God, even though he revealed himself through creation. So God gave them over, not only to sexual perversion, but also to a laundry list of improper behaviors. Paul employed a play on words here that does not come across in English translations. Literally the text reads that since mankind did not see "*fit* to acknowledge God" that "God gave them over to an *unfit* mind" (1:28).

1:29-31. Paul listed twenty-one characteristics that described those who had rejected the revelation of God. The New Testament contains many lists of good things (virtues) and bad things (vices). Ancient authors often used Vice/Virtue lists in their writings. In Paul's letters you can find such lists in 1 Corinthians 5:9-11; 6:9-11; 2 Corinthians 12:20-21; Galatians 5:19-23; Ephesians 5:3-5; and Colossians 3:5, 8, 12. Sometimes only vices or virtues are listed, while in other passages, vices and virtues are compared and contrasted.

Three general characteristics of New Testament Vice/Virtue Lists will help us understand how Paul utilized them in his writings. 1) Considerable variety exists in their form and content. Some of these lists are three words (faith, hope and love), while others are like this one in Romans 1:29-31. 2) No common source of these lists appears to have existed. Paul created them for each specific situation he encountered. 3) Too much variety, not only in the number of items but also in their sequence, exists for one to suggest any fixed rules for their content and construction.

The Greek text reveals some striking word forms that are simply lost in English translations. Paul used alliteration (beginning each word with the same letter or sound) and paronomasia (a fancy term that describes words with similar forms and sounds but with different meanings). He also used onomatopoeia (where the word sounds like what it defines), e.g., "buzz" or "sizzle." In this case, it is the word for gossips (1:29). When you pronounce the Greek word, it conveys a "whisperer."

Some scholars divide this list into two or three distinct groups. Regardless, Paul used more words to describe "ungodly" behavior than the grammar of a sentence would require. He had a point to make and he boldly made it, leaving no stone unturned. I believe Paul arranged these terms in such a way to have maximum impact on his readers. He did not hurriedly jot down a comprehensive list of sins. He chose their order after prayerful consideration.

*Illustration: Have you ever heard a sermon where the preacher moves through the text, and then has a dramatic closing? He might repeat phrases. He might speak his words in rhythm. If able, he might even sing. You might not remember every sermon you hear, but when an orator gives such a closing, it sticks with you for years. An African-American preacher was asked what he thought about whooping (a term used to describe a very emotional end to a sermon). He answered as follows: "What matters in tuning, whooping, singing, humming, moaning, rasping or plain talking your way to the close of the sermon is not the particular style, but whether the text determines the content and emotion of the close. Whatever form it takes, does the close expose the content, mood and feeling of the text? Or, does it take the listener off in other directions, perhaps placing a cherry atop a text that requires tears? Every text won't whoop, hum or sing. So every sermon shouldn't close with one."*⁷

Imagine Paul speaking the words of Romans 1:18-32. His voice would rise and fall as he recounted how God had given mankind over to all manner of wickedness. The list of sins

would pick up a rhythm of their own. As he progressed to 1:29, words would strike an emotional chord as they each began with the same letter: "Being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful." The text would bring people to their knees, weeping at the plight they had brought upon themselves.

1:32. Paul summed up man's depravity by describing the "lowest of the low." People who lead others into sin will approve and applaud their "pupils." Approving or encouraging someone else to sin is a sure sign of a depraved and lost society. When people exchange God's truth for a lie (1:25), then the only words of God they hear are the worst words God will ever say to a human being—"Have it your way."

*Illustration: "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."*⁸

Conclusion

As mentioned above, sin is sin. We all are condemned by Romans 1:18-32. We are idolaters, adulterers, gossips, slanderers . . . and the list goes on.

As mentioned above, recent events in our country initiated by the Supreme Court's ruling that same-sex marriages are legal deserve a thoughtful response from the church. The conclusion of this week's lesson focuses on how our churches can proceed with candor and grace.

A Relevant Question

What does the legalization of same-sex unions ultimately mean? To be honest, I don't know and I don't think anyone, at this point in time, knows either. This means we need not react with heated emotions and judgment.

Illustration: When the calendar approached the year 2000, the entire world panicked over what was going to happen when computer clocks ticked up to the moment when a new millennium would begin. Millions of dollars were spent on protecting databases. I was told all my personal information would be lost forever, so I had best keep hard copies. I remember sitting at my computer on December 31, 1999, watching the countdown. And we all know what happened—nothing! No mishaps, no worldwide financial collapse (we managed that just a few years later), no chaos.

I understand the angst concerning Y2K does not compare to the far-reaching consequences of the legalization of same-sex unions. But I believe we can and should respond with a firm, yet controlled plan of action.

I believe the redefinition of marriage was and is wrong. I know God is still on the throne. I know civilizations come to a moral point where they seem to fade into oblivion. I believe our country continues to slide into moral decay. But, I don't believe God's ultimate plan for his creation hinges upon our country. So in the meantime, I will pray for those who lead our country. I will respond to this moral crisis with as much calmness to carry on as I can possibly muster. I am not going to scream out my convictions at the expense of others. In short, I am going to continue to lead.

Two Carefully Chosen Words

I have noticed two words that describe churches and how they respond to the gay community: "Welcoming" and "Affirming." These words may not appear in print but they might as well appear in bold print on your church sign. What do they mean?

If a church is "welcoming," then that congregation welcomes any and all who come their way. I hope the church I attend is viewed as a "welcoming" family of God. The term, "affirming," relates to how a church treats members of the gay community. If a church is "welcoming" and "affirming," then they accept the lifestyle of a gay person or couple. If a church is "welcoming" but not "affirming," then gay people are welcome to attend, but their lifestyle is not "affirmed." The church I serve falls into this latter category. We welcome all people, but we do not affirm all lifestyles.

This may appear very simplistic and judgmental. Perhaps it is. Our church tries to maintain that delicate balance between genuine concern for all and upholding what we believe to be biblical truth.

Back to the Basics

I preached the gospel this past Lord's Day in the church I serve. I acknowledged the issue at hand and we took time to pray concerning the changes and upheavals around us. Next Sunday, I will preach the gospel again. One of the best examples of this "back to the basics" response is Paul himself. He clearly put the spotlight on the gospel (the good news) at the beginning of his letter to the Romans: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God . . ." (1:16). Then he launched into a scathing description of the fall of mankind (1:18-32). What did Paul do after he delivered this bad news? He turned his attention back to the gospel—the ultimate good news. This is my plan of action.

Live Out the Biblical View of Marriage

God's word defines marriage. We need to embrace this definition, encourage husbands and wives, and offer resources to help make marriages stronger. The divorce rate where I live is extremely high. Couples have a one-in-three chance of staying married. This is unacceptable. Though the church cannot make marriages stronger, the family of God can model God's plan. The marriage relationship is beautiful. The uniting of a man and a woman in marriage is worth the effort. We need to keep this vision before all people. As we teach these important doctrines, marriages will grow stronger.

Expect to be Misunderstood

Emotions will be raw and tempers will flare. This is to be expected. No doubt, our church has already been criticized for our stand on this issue. Churches may find themselves in the crosshairs of those who want to prove a point or diminish a congregation's influence. Some criticism you can absorb. Some criticism you can deflect. Some criticism may cause you to evaluate and change the tone or wording of your response. Just expect to be misunderstood.

Be Hopeful

Above all, keep your eyes on Jesus. Storms come. They always do. Our nation faces a huge and turbulent storm. But as Billy Graham once said, "I read the last verses of the Book of Revelation and I know how things will end." That, indeed, is good news.

Meet the Writer: Dr. Stephen G. Hatfield

Stephen G. Hatfield lives in Lewisville, Texas, where he has served as the pastor of the First Baptist Church since 1993. Stephen and his wife, Marcie, have five children and ten grandchildren. He is a graduate of Ouachita Baptist University (B.A.) and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary (M.Div., Ph.D.). Dr. Hatfield runs for health reasons and plays golf whenever he can.

BaptistWay Press®

See www.baptistwaypress.org for additional study materials on

Romans: A Gospel-Centered Worldview

and more than fifty other Bible studies by BaptistWay Press®,
or call 1-866-249-1799 (M-Fri 8:30 a.m.-5:00 p.m. central time).

¹These and other painful jokes can be found at

<http://www.cybersalt.org/clean-jokes/pastors-good-newsbad-news>

²W. MacGorman, "Romans" *The Layman's Bible Book Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 9-10.

³James E. Hightower, Jr, Compiler, *Illustrating Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1984), 17.

⁴J. W. MacGorman, 27.

⁵R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1991), 42

⁶*Ibid*, 43.

⁷Taken from <http://thefrontporch.org/2014/07/elements-of-styles-in-black-preaching/>

⁸C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (New York: MacMillan, 1946), 72-73.