

The Gospel and the Wrath of God **Romans 1:16-18**

As Paul began his letter to the church in Rome, he first introduced himself, and then he focused on explaining his understanding of the gospel. To Paul, a correct understanding of the gospel was the fundamental cornerstone of the Christian faith. Only the gospel that had been spoken of by the prophets, was Christ-centered, resulted in obedience, and gave peace with God could give the believer the assurance of salvation. After outlining the gospel message, Paul explained his deep desire to visit the church in Rome, and told them that his motive in doing so was to encourage them in the faith and hopefully “impart some spiritual gift to you, that you may be established” (Romans 1:11).

After this brief introduction of himself, his faith, and his purposes, Paul began to expound the main themes of his letter. It is here, in the middle of the opening chapter, that we begin to wade into the deeper waters of Paul’s theology. The passage we look at today is the thesis of Paul’s letter to the Romans. It is the premise on which the remainder of his message is based. These verses function as both a summary of the gospel Paul had just explained, as well as the foundation for the theology Paul will elaborate upon for the rest of his epistle.

These verses encapsulate the most transformative truth of Scripture and we must guard ourselves against dismissing it too quickly because of overfamiliarity. Though brief, this passage is full of theological ideas that we must get our minds around. It is difficult work, but a proper understanding of Christian theology is required for believers as they mature in the faith. While it is perfectly acceptable for a young child to think that she has “asked Jesus into her heart” and know nothing more about the gospel, the same cannot be said for an adult believer. Again, if a young child puts a quarter given to him by his father into the plate as it passes him on a Sunday morning, he ought not to be doing the same thing when he is a wage-earning adult.

One reason for this is because, what we understand about God determines, to a large degree, how we live our life. As Paul wrote to another church that was struggling to get its theology correct,

“¹And I, brothers and sisters, could not speak to you as spiritual people, but only as fleshly, as to infants in Christ. ²I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to consume it. But even now you are not yet able, ³for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like ordinary people?”
(1 Corinthians 3:1-3).

The church at Corinth had not matured sufficiently in their faith to understand accurately the truths Paul had taught, and this was the cause of many of their misguided and sinful behaviors. They had not developed in their understanding of Who God was and what He expected, so they lacked unity, struggled with sexual sin, litigated against one another, had an improper view of marriage, took advantage of their Christian liberty, had disorderly worship practices, and misused their spiritual gifts. Their immaturity in the faith had left them “like ordinary people” (1 Corinthians 1:3).

So, as faithful believers, we must be diligent to try to understand the main ideas that are foundational to the Christian faith. And I am confident that God will reward our efforts as we do so.

The Power of the Gospel

As we mentioned last week, Paul preached the gospel throughout the Roman world despite suffering many hardships. He had been imprisoned, stoned, beaten with rods, mocked, and called a blasphemer. His message of the gospel was seen as foolishness at best, and cannibalistic at worst, due to pagan misconceptions regarding the rite of communion. Nonetheless, Paul boldly proclaimed “I am not ashamed of the gospel” (v. 16). No fear or hardship could dissuade Paul from preaching the Gospel to those whom God placed in his path.

It is unfortunate that the same cannot be said for many of us. We would never admit it with words, but our actions often appear as if we are ashamed of the gospel. We keep silent when we should speak simply because we fear being ridiculed or being seen as politically incorrect. Our local culture is not physically hostile to Christians, that is, we are not, here in southern California at least, beaten or stoned for our beliefs. But the world is clearly contemptuous of Christian ideas and flatly rejects a Christian worldview. And it is because we fear being mocked or thought backward in our thinking, that we keep silent when we should speak.

The main reason that modern thinking is contrary to the gospel is because the gospel, as presented in Scripture, describes humanity as innately sinful. Scripture is clear that humanity is corrupt and wicked in nature, will, and intellect. It announces that all of humanity is destined to damnation and that they can do nothing to help themselves. The gospel requires that humanity put aside its pride and sense of self-sufficiency and rely instead on an omnipotent and all-sovereign God. None of these ideas are compatible with the current worldview of a secular mind.

But Paul was not ashamed to preach the gospel, because he knew that in it lay the only source of power to save humanity from its lost and helpless position. The gospel was, and is, “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (v. 16). The word translated as power, *dunamis*, is the root of our word dynamite. It describes the power of a merciful and loving God to resolve the conflict between His holiness and humanity’s sinfulness. And let us make it clear that it is the power of the gospel that saves. It is not the power of evangelists, not the power of the church, not the power of the preacher. The message of the gospel, alone, has the power sufficient to save humanity from its fallen state.

It is a truth of Scripture that man cannot save himself. As the prophet Jeremiah rhetorically asked the people of Israel,

“Can the Ethiopian change his skin,
Or the leopard his spots?
Then you as well can do good
Who are accustomed to doing evil” (Jeremiah 13:23).

Man cannot save himself because, as God said through the psalmist David,

“¹The fool has said in his heart, ‘there is no God.’
They are corrupt, they have committed detestable acts;
There is no one who does good.

²The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of mankind
To see if there are any who understand,

Who seek God.

³They have all turned aside, together they are corrupt;
There is no one who does good, not even one” (Psalm 14:1-3).

We cannot save ourselves by doing good works or by being spiritually mature. Church attendance, giving our time and energy, Bible reading and prayer, obedience to the commands of the faith, and sharing the gospel are all worthy and required actions of the believer, but none of these, even if performed faithfully for many years, are sufficient to merit salvation.

We are powerless to save ourselves for two reasons. First, we are unable even to make a beginning to do so. Before we receive faith, we are fallen and sinful and incapable of recognizing that we must appease a holy God Whom we have greatly offended. As Paul will elaborate upon later in this letter, “⁶for while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . ⁸But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:6, 8).

In fact, we are so impotent spiritually that we cannot even begin to comprehend the message of the gospel without God’s grace. “But a natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). Before God gave us the grace to understand the message of the gospel, we believed “the word of the cross [to be] foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:18). In other words, Scripture teaches us that God must give us the grace even to understand our wretchedness and the need we have to respond to Him.

A second reason we cannot save ourselves is because God is infinitely holy and we could not possibly appease Him even if we tried. Let’s suppose that we did read the Bible every day, and pray for hours each morning. We serve faithfully and selflessly in the local church body for decades. We give financially almost to the point of ruin. What would that matter to God? Would He be any less than He is if we did not do so? Would His Kingdom not go forward if we did not participate? To put in simply, even if we did everything we could, we could not do enough. We ought to rejoice that God’s grace is free, because if it were not, we could never afford it.

God alone has the power to save. It is inherent in His nature. As God was sovereign over creation so, too, He is sovereign over salvation.

“⁸Let all the earth fear the Lord;
Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.
⁹For He spoke, and it was done;
He commanded, and it stood firm” (Psalm 33:8-9).

“⁴Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love ⁵He predestined us to adoption as sons and daughters through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will” (Ephesians 1:4-5).

Just as “He spoke, and it was done” in the act of creation, He also “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world” to be His children. That is the power of the gospel.

The Universality of the Gospel

It is the gospel alone that saves. And we must understand that it saves us from something, and it saves us for something. We are saved from eternal damnation and separation from God. We are saved for good works for His Kingdom. A child of God has been “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). We are rescued from the ultimate penalty for our sin, and equipped for service for Him Who saved us. The gospel is both eternal in its impact and universal in its application.

The gospel is universal in its application in two senses. To begin, when we are saved, it changes everything about us. The word salvation, *sōtēria*, can have many meanings. It can be a literal, physical saving as in the case of Noah, “by faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (Hebrews 11:7). However, it is most often used in a spiritual sense, such as when Jesus spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well,

“²¹Jesus said to her, ‘believe Me, woman, that a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ²²You Samaritans worship what you do not know; we worship what we do know, because salvation is from the Jews. ²³But a time is coming, and even now has arrived, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshipers” (John 4:22-24).

In this spiritual sense, as it is used in this passage, salvation saves humanity from, among other things:

Self-indulgence - “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his own father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be My disciple” (Luke 14:26).

False Religion - “For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13).

Sin - “²⁰an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for the Child who has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will give birth to a Son; and you shall name Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins”” (Matthew 1:20-21).

God’s wrath - “Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him” (Romans 5:9).

The gospel is also universal in to whom it applies. As Paul writes, the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (v. 16). We see that Scripture clearly teaches that the gospel is not only for certain races, or ethnicities. It is not exclusively the possession of one social or economic class or of people who have attained a certain level of education. It is not available only to those of certain backgrounds or parentage. In Paul’s time, the Jew could not find salvation in the Law nor could the Gentile in pagan rituals. Since all of humanity needs the gospel, the gospel is available to “everyone who believes” (v. 16).

Pisteuō is the word translated ‘believe’ and it means simply to trust in, or to give credit to. But two things need to be said. First, when used in the context of salvation, the word always implies an ongoing event. That is, it might more accurately, though less readably, be translated as “is believing.” Second, the term does not refer to a mental persuasion only. It means a belief that is acted upon, not simply understood. A wonderful example is that from the life of a pagan Roman,

“⁵And when Jesus entered Capernaum, a centurion came to Him, begging Him, ⁶and saying, ‘Lord, my servant is lying paralyzed at home, terribly tormented.’ ⁷Jesus said to him, ‘I will come and heal him.’ ⁸But the centurion replied, ‘Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. ⁹For I also am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, “go!” and he goes, and to another, “come!” and he comes, and to my slave, “do this!” and he does it.’ ¹⁰Now when Jesus heard this, He was amazed and said to those who were following, ‘truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. ¹¹And I say to you that many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; ¹²but the sons of the kingdom will be thrown out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹³And Jesus said to the centurion, ‘go; it shall be done for you as you have believed.’ And the servant was healed at that very moment” (Matthew 8:5-13).

This Roman centurion not only possessed the knowledge that Jesus could heal his servant, but he was given grace to believe that He could do so by His own divine power. He did not need proof that Jesus had healed his servant. He did not need to witness the healing. He simply trusted that Jesus would do as He had said. That is believing in the biblical sense.

Our passage today also informs us that while the Jews were given precedence in chronology, they were not the only race chosen by God in our New Testament understanding of the term. As Jesus said, “many will come from east and west, and recline at the table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven” (v.11). In fact, this was a concept Jesus tried to help the hard-hearted and misguided Pharisees understand,

“³⁹They answered and said to Him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ Jesus said to them, ‘if you are Abraham’s children, do the deeds of Abraham. ⁴⁰But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. ⁴¹You are doing the deeds of your father.’ They said to Him, ‘we were not born as a result of sexual immorality; we have one Father: God.’ ⁴²Jesus said to them, ‘if God were your Father, you would love Me, for I came forth from God and am here; for I have not even come on My own, but He sent Me. ⁴³Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot listen to My word. ⁴⁴You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he tells a lie, he speaks from his own nature, because he is a liar and the father of lies” (John 8:39-44).

Jesus made it quite clear that physical or spiritual heritage was meaningless in terms of salvation. A Pharisee, like a pastor’s child today, might have every opportunity to know the truth, but if they do not choose to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, they are lost, regardless of their pedigree.

The Mechanism of the Gospel

Since we are saved by faith in believing the gospel, it is important to understand exactly the process by which that happens. We must begin by recognizing that the power of the gospel to save is based upon the righteousness of God. In one of the most widely read, and often preached, verses of Scripture, Paul paraphrased the prophet Habakkuk, “the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written ‘but the righteous man shall live by faith’” (v. 17). It is not our righteousness, but God’s that saves us. As Paul later writes, “there is no righteous person, not even one” (Romans 3:10). It is God’s own righteousness that is imputed to the believer at the moment of salvation.

To ‘impute’ something means to consider someone as having that attribute or characteristic. That is, God considers believers as righteous even though they are not. When God looks at believers, He sees His righteousness instead of our sin. It is not that we have earned this righteousness, but rather that God, by His grace, simply chooses to treat us as if we possessed His own righteousness. This is serious theology, so we must take the time to get it right. And to do so, we must follow this important biblical concept throughout Scripture. To begin,

“⁸By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he left, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he lived as a stranger in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; ¹⁰for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:8-10).

The writer to the Hebrews made clear the fact that Abraham was not saved by his actions but by his faith. It was Abraham’s faith that compelled him to act. It was in faith that “he believed in the Lord; and He credited it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). That is, Abraham was not seen as righteous until he believed, and God then imputed His own righteousness to him.

Paul emphasized the futility of man trying to rely upon his own supposed righteousness.

“⁸More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them mere rubbish, so that I may gain Christ, ⁹and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (Philippians 3:8-9).

To try to justify ourselves by our obedience is worthless. We can only have the assurance of salvation if we are “found in Him, not having a righteousness of [our] own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ” (Philippians 3:9).

And this righteousness that comes from God is unrelated to our own works.

“²¹But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²²but it is the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:21-24).

Every man and woman who has ever lived has fallen short of earning salvation, no matter how diligently they have tried. We can only be declared righteous in the eyes of God if He chooses to impart His righteousness to us as an act of grace. Salvation is a gift of God that we receive through faith.

The Wrath of God

What makes that grace so amazing, is that it comes from a God Who has every right to treat us with contempt. We are all well aware that the world hates the idea of a wrathful God, but Scripture requires it. The gospel by which we are saved from eternal damnation would make no sense if God did not condemn sinful people to eternal punishment. God's infinite grace can only be properly appreciated if we also comprehend God's holiness and His anger toward sin. Forgiveness can only be valued in proportion to our understanding of God's wrath toward sinners.

People like to imagine God as a God of love only. The world prefers a God Who might be strict and have rules, but in the end relents and welcomes everyone into paradise. After all, most people believe that they do their best, and surely a loving God would not condemn people to Hell simply for a few missteps along the way. But we must remember that we are made in God's image, we do not make God in ours, and Scripture clearly insists that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (v. 18).

We know that God is perfect, and one of His perfections is that He is in pure harmony with Himself. That is to say, all of God's attributes act together in unison to make Him Who He is. He is wrathful and loving in equal proportion. He is as just and holy as He is gracious and merciful. There is impeccable balance among the attributes of God. As the psalmist succinctly put it,

"You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness" (Psalm 45:7).

Though the world denies the fairness of a wrathful God, God has always been angry at human sin. We can begin with the Flood,

"⁵Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of mankind was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. ⁶So the Lord was sorry that He had made mankind on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart. ⁷Then the Lord said, 'I will wipe out mankind whom I have created from the face of the land'" (Genesis 6:5-7).

Then we can see His wrath again at the Tower of Babel,

"⁶And the Lord said, 'behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they have started to do, and now nothing which they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another's speech.' ⁸So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth" (Genesis 11:6-8).

And, of course, there is the narrative about Sodom and Gomorrah.

"²⁴Then the Lord rained brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah from the Lord out of heaven, ²⁵and He overthrew those cities, and all the surrounding area, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground" (Genesis 19:24-25).

And we are not yet through the first half of Genesis! We could also talk about God's wrath toward Pharaoh during the time of the Exodus (Exodus 14). We could mention His anger toward Aaron and Miriam, who were punished by God for challenging Moses' authority (Numbers 12). We could refer to many pagan kings to whom God showed His power in wrath; men such as Sennacherib (2 Kings 18-19), Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 4), and Belshazzar (Daniel 5).

And God's wrath is not only an Old Testament phenomenon, though many misguided thinkers argue that the Old Testament God was a God of wrath and violence but the New Testament God, Jesus Christ, remedied that by being a God of love and peace. Scripture simply does not support such an interpretation of the Godhead. While it is true that Jesus did say, "for God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16), He also stated that "the one who believes in the Son has eternal life; but the one who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:36).

Such teaching was foundational to the New Testament church.

"See that no one deceives you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Ephesians 5:6).

"Therefore, treat the parts of your earthly body as dead to sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed, which amounts to idolatry. For it is because of these things that the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience" (Colossians 3:5-6).

"when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God, and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus" (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8).

God's wrath is not an act of emotion. It is not a frustrated impulse. God does not lose His temper. We must never compare God's anger to our own human, sinful anger. God's anger is just, measured, and specifically targeted toward human sin. We can see no better example of this than the cross. It is in the death of Christ that God's wrath and His love meet. His holiness required that He punish mankind's sin, but His love compelled Him to send His own Son as an atonement for that sin. The wrath of a loving God was poured out on His Son so that wicked men might be saved. Such is the power of the gospel.

We also see that God's wrath is also universal. That is, it comes "against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (v. 18). It is not mitigated by our good actions or kind gestures. God does not keep some sort of accounting system in which our good behavior offsets our bad behavior. And even if He did, we could not make up for our own sin. All of our sins must be punished by God. For believers, this punishment took place at the cross. For unbelievers, that punishment is yet to come.

The wrath of God is expressed on all ungodliness, *asebeia*, a word that means impiety. It refers to a lack of reverence or respect for God and the things of God. It is false worship. But that does not mean idolatry only in the sense of praying to some stone statue. Idolatry is putting anything else before God in our lives. It is a violation of the first commandment (Exodus 20:3). When our work, or our finances, our time, our family, or even our service to the church (good works) become more important than God, that is

ungodliness. And the wrath of God is also inflicted upon those who practice unrighteousness. This word, *adikia*, refers to the outcome of ungodliness. It is the sin that follows the thought. When we do not honor God as we should in our thoughts, when we do not hold to a high view of God as we should, we inevitably act in ways that are sinful.

Though it may not be intentional or deliberate, when believers sin, our unrighteous acts “suppress the truth” (v. 18). Our sinful behavior acts against our testimony about God. When believers sin, they contradict their own statements of faith and undermine their witness to unbelievers. And the world takes full advantage of this inconsistency and uses it to deny the gospel. Thus the sinful acts of believers become excuses by which the unsaved seek to justify their denial of the faith. This is something all believers ought to keep in mind as we go through our day.

Takeaways

The gospel is powerful and universal. Its message is that every human being who has ever lived has fallen short of the standard God has set for having a relationship with Him. However, it also says that this wrathful God, by His own sovereign choice, chose to condemn His Son to death as an atonement for sin. And those to whom God gives the grace to receive this truth, He clothes them in His righteousness forever. He sees not their sin but the blood of Christ when He looks upon them, and He fills them with His Holy Spirit and empowers them to live a life of gratitude and service in response to His calling. Such is the power of the gospel.