

The Plight of Humanity and the Power of God

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Preacher: Rev. Jonathan St. Clair

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. From the letter of Paul to the Romans.

For I am not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written, the righteous will live by faith.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

[1 : 19] For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him. But their thinking became futile, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being, and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity, for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things, rather than the Creator, who is forever praised.

Amen. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.

In the same way, the men also abandoned natural relations with women, and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

[2 : 22] Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.

They become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed, and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice.

They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful. They invent ways of doing evil. They disobey their parents. They have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things, but also approve of those who practice them.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Good morning, Christ Church. Just to see a show of hands, how many of you wish that you were preaching this sermon?

[3 : 25] How many of you have ever witnessed someone walk on a tightrope across the open crater of an active volcano? Anyone ever seen that? That's what you're about to witness right now.

I want to reassure you that I plan to speak about the one thing in this text that you really want to hear about, which is the wrath of God. But I know that our eyes are probably glued to these thorny verses in verses 24 to 27 about sexuality.

And probably one of the reasons we've never preached the epistle to the Romans in our 17 years as a church, at Christ Church, is probably because of this text.

Who wants to walk over bubbling hot lava? So I need to make some remarks here up front. Otherwise, we're going to be distracted about sex the whole time and not really hear the main point of this scripture.

In God's providential timing, a few months back, I preached on Jesus' teaching about marriage and singleness, sexuality and gender, and the Gospel of Matthew chapter 19.

[4 : 28] If you weren't here for that, I encourage you to go back and listen to that. I'm going to repeat a little bit of that preamble as we enter in today. And I want to just say, anytime we talk about sexuality, recognize these are personal, sensitive, serious, even controversial matters.

They're not just about issues. It's about real people. It affects every person here, people who are not here, that we love so much and care about so much, our parents, our siblings, our kids, our friends and neighbors and coworkers.

Anytime we talk about sexuality, I feel inadequate and often quite nervous because these topics just inevitably bring up tension and conflict and texts and emails and conversations that aren't all that fun.

And perhaps you are more nervous than I am when these things come up because issues of sexuality bring up immense pain and sadness, perhaps even guilt and shame for things that we've done, things that have been done to us, ways that we've been wronged.

Some of us are here today, and if we're honest, we're trapped in sexual addictions and we have sexual secrets. Some of us are here today, and we're same-sex attracted, we're gay, the church has not been a safe place for us to feel that we belong or that we are accepted.

[5 : 51] And if you're nervous, I just want to reassure all of you that I love you, that I'm your pastor, and I love you so much. And I want you to fear not.

I just want you to open up yourself to God. God is here to meet you in his compassion, his kindness, his healing, his transforming power.

Some of us are here, we're exploring Christianity, and if that's you, we preach on this text once every 17 years. And the first thing you need to do is really get straight on Jesus.

Is he the son of God? Did he die for your sins? Did he rise from the dead? And have you experienced his grace? If you deal with that, then let's have a conversation about the ethics of Jesus. But every person here is broken in the area of sexuality, including myself.

We don't have it all together. Our common ground is that we need wisdom. There's not a lot of wisdom to be had on these issues, and we need wisdom. And I don't think that we're all going to walk out of this room today and agree.

[6 : 58] And that's okay. I just want to open the door for us to seek the mind of God. And I want to say once again that sex is not the main point of this passage. If you look closely, it's neither the upfront number one concern, nor is it at the end is the climactic concern.

It's just sandwiched in the middle. But there are two wrong ways to read that middle part. One wrong way in our culture war that's raging right now is that if you're a conservative on the right, you can read texts like this and you can use them as a club to beat people over the head and practice oppression and exclusion in the name of Jesus.

And I just have to say out loud, that's wrong. That's bad. Stop doing that. If you're a progressive on the left, you might make an equal and opposite error, which is to dismiss a text like this as outdated and to fail to appreciate the sexual revolution of the prophets and the apostles.

These men and women who insisted and demanded that all sexual activity be channeled into marriage between one man and one woman. And in doing so, they forced the sexual genie back into the marital bottle.

And when that happened, it did untold good for human society and civilization, not least for women and children. So as we're walking this tightrope over this open crater of an active volcano with boiling hot lava, we want to not fall off on the right and we want to not fall off on the left.

[8 : 32] Okay, how am I doing so far? So what I want to ask all of you to do right now is to just put a pin in this, suspend your judgment for a moment so that we can go on and talk about the main point of this passage.

And then we're going to circle back briefly as it unfolds in the text. An advanced apology. This is a bit of a longer sermon, but blame the Apostle Paul. He put a lot in this text, okay?

So what he's saying and what the message is for us today is that the gospel reveals the cause of God's wrath, the consequences, and the cure.

The gospel reveals the cause of God's wrath, the consequences, and the cure. First of all, the gospel reveals the cause of God's wrath. Notice in verse 17, it says the gospel, in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed.

And then in verse 18, it says, the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven. So two things are being revealed. Two ages, two realms are being revealed.

[9 : 33] The old age, the old realm of God's wrath, and the new age, the new realm of God's righteousness in the gospel. And Romans 1 to 3 is there to show us what it means to live under God's wrath so that we'll see the necessity for and the power of the gospel to bring us out from under the wrath of God and to bring us up and under the righteousness of God in Christ.

And so we're gonna keep repeating verses 16 to 17 because that's the thesis of this whole letter. But we're also gonna repeat these next couple weeks verse 18 because that's the thesis of this next section, these next three chapters.

And you'll notice that Paul's methodology is the exact opposite of the church in North America today. The church in North America does not wanna talk about the wrath of God.

We don't wanna talk about the godlessness or wickedness of people because that won't attract people, it'll make them feel uncomfortable, they won't come back to church, it won't touch their felt needs, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera.

But Paul, if he were here, would say, can we really know God and know the love of God without the wrath of God? Can we really even see the need that we have for the gospel if we don't talk about the wrath of God?

[10 : 47] Now, is the apostle Paul the only one in the New Testament that insists on wrath? Well, the first preacher in the New Testament, John the Baptist, his main message was flee from the wrath of God to come.

And we say, yikes, let's move on from John the Baptist to Jesus. That's why I prefer his preaching of love and grace and compassion. Well, here's Jesus preaching. In the Sermon on the Mount, he says in Matthew 7, every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Matthew chapter 10, Jesus says, do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather be afraid of the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell.

Matthew 13, the Son of Man will send out his angels and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. They will throw them into the blazing furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Jeez, thanks Jesus. Happy Mother's Day. You know, that's tough preaching from Jesus but that's what he says. He talks about the wrath of God and what is the wrath of God?

[11 : 53] The wrath of God is not human wrath which is so often irrational, uncontrolled emotion, very often arbitrary and almost always full of vanity, malice, and revenge.

God's wrath is free of all that human poison. The scriptures say that God is light and in him there's no darkness at all. And so the wrath of God is his holy hatred of evil.

The wrath of God is his settled righteous opposition to darkness. It's his uncompromising hostility against sin. If we're going to see love in God then we also must see his hatred because God hates all that opposes what's good and true and beautiful.

God hates all that damages, defaces, and destroys his creation and his creatures. If God didn't hate those things then God would not be God and he would certainly not be a God that's worthy of our worship.

So Paul says the wrath of God is being revealed and what is causing the wrath of God? He says it's our denial of God. It's our suppression of the truth about God.

[13 : 00] Verse 18 says the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all what? All godlessness, all ungodliness. we were created by God and for God to trust the truth of God and to live these God-centered, God-full, godly lives.

All of us and everyone you've ever met or will ever meet were made to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and strength. And the problem is that we're not godly like that, we are godless.

We're made to be these dependent creatures but instead we seek independence from God. We're made to be these God-centered people but instead we become these very self-centered people.

And that's the essence of sin. The essence of sin is to be godless, to be ungodly, to be against God. It's to hold down the truth about God and refuse to desire God with our whole being, to want Him as the supreme object of our desire and to want to know Him and to live entirely for Him, to do His will and to live for His glory and His glory alone.

See, Paul is telling us here what we've been created for. We've been created in verse 20 to be in awe of the invisible qualities of God. We have His eternal power, His divine nature, His holiness, His righteousness, and justice, all these things.

[14 : 30] He says, we've been designed, according to verse 21, to glorify and thank God in all things. We've been made, according to verse 23, to delight in the glory of the immortal God and we've been fashioned, as verse 25 says, to worship and serve our Creator and to praise Him and please Him with every thought, word, and deed that we do.

Our failure to do these things is not the breaking of some random rules that God has set up. for us. Our failure to do these things is in fact a violation of our very own essence, our very own nature as creatures made to live with and for our Creator.

And so, every time we fail to do these things, we're tearing at the fabric of our own being. To break away from God is to break our very selves because myself needs God more than it needs oxygen.

oxygen. You don't want to go very long without oxygen. Godliness is our design. Godlessness is our demise.

And friends, even before Adam and Eve ate that forbidden fruit, they had already fallen into ungodliness. They were questioning God. They were saying, did God really say?

[15 : 49] Is God really good? Is He for us? Can we trust Him? Can we trust His word? Any of you ever question like that? Any of you ever live against God and apart from God in that way?

Just think about this morning. Today's Sunday. It's the Lord's Day. How much time passed this morning where you didn't think about God? You didn't thank God?

You didn't glorify God? Think about your past week. Did you love God with all of your heart, soul, and strength? Paul is saying that the primary matter on which we're all going to be judged is our response to God and all that He is and all that He has done.

And he says that God has revealed enough of Himself so that even the most irreligious people can look around creation and know that we are, we're just mere creatures. We are not the key to our own existence and the existence of everything around us.

We know at least that. We know enough to believe that we are utterly dependent and completely accountable to God. Although they knew God, they neither thanked God nor glorified Him as God.

[17 : 02] Every person we meet, including ourselves, has enough of the truth to know that the only right and reasonable response to God is to glorify and thank Him, to worship and serve Him.

But Paul says the problem is we suppress the truth. we restrain the truth. We hold the truth down. We fight against it.

We push it aside. We dismiss it and twist it and explain it away and do everything we can to get rid of it, to throttle it, to drown it out. And the gospel is revealing to us that the cause of God's wrath is this truth suppression, this godlessness in our lives.

Friends, do you realize that apart from the grace of God, your life has been poisoned by this godlessness? Your life has been completely ruined by ungodliness.

To withhold from God, the God who made us, anything of ourselves is a sin against Him grievously. Every human being, Paul says, is living in this old age, this old realm of godlessness under the wrath, the condemnation, the judgment of God without exception.

[18 : 20] And unless and until God graciously and powerfully intervenes to bring us into this new realm, this new age of the righteousness and salvation and life of God, we're stuck.

We're absolutely stuck. So the gospel reveals God's, the cause of God's wrath, but it also reveals the consequences. Really, the rest of Romans 1 just unpacks verse 18 and talks about how our godlessness leads to wickedness.

Our ungodliness results in unrighteousness. If our relationship to God were right, then all of our actions would be right. And we'd not be guilty of any of the particular things that are listed here in our text.

But because we are ungodly, because we're against God, we become unrighteous. We become against other people. We even become against ourselves. And Paul describes this descent, step by step, downward, downward, downward, from godlessness to unrighteousness.

And he talks about a few things. He talks about deceitful idols, degraded bodies, depraved minds, and decaying societies. Each of those is a sermon in and of itself. I'm going to touch upon them ever so briefly.

[19 : 35] First of all, deceitful idols. He says in verse 23, we exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal human beings. And in verse 25, we exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served created things rather than the creator.

My wife and I had the privilege of going to the United Kingdom last summer. And let's suppose that had we gone on that trip and taken a million U.S. dollars, like we typically do when we travel, we took a million U.S. dollars and we exchanged that money for 100 British pounds.

What would you say about that exchange? Would you say that that was a wise exchange? No, you would say that's outrageous. That's absurd. Jonathan, you're an idiot. And Paul's saying we exchanged the glory and the truth of the living creator God for these counterfeit gods.

We traded in this life-giving relationship with God because we'd rather enjoy the creatures and the created goods and created ideas. We've become so confused.

It's absurd. We've been created to worship this uncorruptible, majestic creator, and yet here we are creating these little golden cast substitutes and we say this little thing down here, this is ultimate.

[20 : 57] This is what I'm going to live for. This is my precious money or power. Let's live for the state. Let's live for the markets.

You know, let's live for our race. Let's worship and serve our bodies. I've got a great idea. Let's live entirely for our children. Let us bow down to human-made ideas about God rather than the self-revelation of God himself.

And some of you might say, Jonathan, you're taking this too far. There are no real idols in the modern world. That's all ancient, primitive stuff. We've outgrown it. We've matured beyond it. I could literally take you outside right now and show you people bowing down to these little black mirrors that they're carrying around in their hand.

And those little mirrors reflect our image back to ourselves so that all we do all day is see ourselves and we go around like this. I'm not kidding. Our modern world is full of idols.

And these idols, they really just exalt us. They're there to put us in control so that we don't have to rely on the control of God in our lives.

[22 : 09] And again, I can't say much about this but I encourage you to look at these books, Counterfeit Gods, The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power by Tim Keller and also a book by Richard Foster that has some dynamite on the front about money, sex, and power.

A lot more we could say about that. But Paul moves from our deceitful idols to our degraded bodies. And he says in verse 24, he says, Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

You know, the body and sex, these are some of God's best gifts. And we take in those gifts that are designed to operate in a male-female marriage, to ennoble us and to humanize us.

And whenever we take those gifts and we remove them from that God-designed context and we put them over here into any other context, inevitably, Paul says, degrades us and dehumanizes us.

Paul's writing from the city of Corinth in 57 AD and he's looking out in this city he can literally see the cult of Aphrodite which is the goddess of love. He sees all these girls and these women who are being objectified and used.

[23 : 25] Paul can look over at the cult of Apollo, the god of beauty and the shrine that's been set up to the unbridled male sex drive to do anything at once without any limits and Paul looks at all this and says, oh my goodness, they've taken God's best gift and they've turned even it into an idol.

And it's doing so much harm. It's doing so much damage to people. People think that in their sleeping around and in all their experiences of false intimacy they're just expressing their freedom but what's really happening is they're becoming more and more enslaved.

And so Paul writes to this church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 6 and he says this to these people who are surrounded by a cult of sex.

So pressured to conform to the pattern of that world around them. And here's what he says. He says, do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?

Do not be deceived. Neither opposite sex sinners nor same sex sinners nor idolaters nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.

[24 : 41] And Paul says, that is what some of you at Christ Church Corinth that's what some of you were. That's what some of you used to be. But then God came in.

And God came in and he says, but you were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of God. Paul's saying that no matter how much you've slept around, no matter how much false intimacy you've practiced, it doesn't matter anymore.

You've been cleansed. You've been set apart to God. You've been declared righteous in God's sight. But now, he says, brothers and sisters, you've got to unlearn all those old ways that degraded you and you've got to learn God's new ways that humanize you, that ennoble you.

And so he says, the body is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord. And the Lord for the body. Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself?

He says, flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body but whoever sins sexually sins against their own body. Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God?

[25 : 55] You are not your own. You were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies. Paul's saying to be a Christian is to no longer have this very low view of the body.

To be a Christian is to have a very high an exalted view of the body. That this body that's going to be one day resurrected from the dead, this body even now is full of the Holy Spirit of God.

This body's been purchased by the infinite value of the blood of Christ. This body no longer belongs to me, it belongs to God. And Paul's question to us in this text is how many of us have acted as if our bodies are not God's but they're our own.

How many of us have dishonored God with our bodies, with our eyes, with our thoughts, with our hearts and our desires?

Can any of us honestly look in the mirror or look in the face of God himself and say, I am sexually righteous? And Paul's whole point is no one can do that.

[27 : 03] None of us are righteous. No, not one. Again, so much more to say about that. You're going to have to go listen to other sermons that are preached. But Paul's talking about our deceitful idols, our degraded bodies, and then our depraved minds and decaying societies.

He says in verse 28, furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind so that they do what ought not to be done. We've been made to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And then Paul lists for us these 21 vices in verses 29 to 31. Of all the ways we don't love our neighbor, we destroy our neighbor, we make our neighbor absolutely unhappy and miserable.

If you just scan over that list, is that not a perfect summary of human history? Does it not explain why things are as they are?

We tell ourselves with all of our education, all of our technology, all of our culture, that we're going to continually improve and make progress and one day bring in the utopia.

[28 : 11] And yet, somehow, in this entire last century, we've not yet been able to eradicate, with all of our advances, we've not yet been able to eradicate greed, for example, or envy of our neighbor.

In fact, Paul says, we invent new ways of becoming even more vile and violent and vicious toward one another.

And what does God do about all this ungodliness and unrighteousness? Three times, it says, God gave them over. God gave them over. God gave them over.

When we refuse to glorify God as God, when we do not thank Him, when we do not worship and serve Him as we ought, when we, in our wisdom and our cleverness, dismiss Him and turn our back on Him, then God does exactly the same thing to us.

We give Him up, and so He gives us up. We abandon God, and so He abandons us. We break up our relationship with Him, and so He allows us to break up everything else in His creation.

[29 : 18] He hands us over to ourselves so that we just stew in our own juices and go round and around in circles. And when God withdraws Himself and His presence, all that's vile and violent and vicious floods in and is let loose and given free reign so that the world becomes a living hell.

And that's what hell is. Hell is just simply being given over to ourselves to exist in a state of being without God, without His restraining hand and His restraining grace that holds back all of our self-centeredness.

And you see, the gospel reveals these things to us. The gospel reveals the cause of God's wrath and the consequences of God's wrath, but it also reveals the cure of God's wrath.

Now, so far, you're like, this is an awful sermon. Okay? This is terrible preaching. It's Mother's Day. And why all this doom and gloom?

Why are you making us feel so helpless and so hopeless? Well, that's precisely the point. Do we see now why Paul says that he's not ashamed of the gospel?

[30 : 33] Because he says that Christians are the only people on the planet who know not only the cause and the consequences of God's wrath, but we know the cure. We not only know the plight of humanity, but we know the power of God, the one power that's sufficient to deal with our deepest problems.

Paul says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation for everyone who believes, first for the Jew, then for the Gentile, because in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last.

As it is written, the righteous will live by faith. Paul says, we living in the midst of this old age and this old sad realm of the wrath of God, God has come in and he's revealed something new.

He's revealed a new age and a new realm of his righteousness, a righteousness from God that God, in his infinite wisdom, in his love, in his mercy and compassion, he has made a way to save the ungodly and the unrighteous.

He's made a way to make us righteous, to give to us and impute to us a righteousness not of our own but of his own son, Jesus Christ. Amen?

[31 : 52] When Paul says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel, he means, actually, I'm very proud of the gospel. I glory in the gospel and I boast in the gospel and the gospel just thrills me down to the very marrow of my bones and the very core of my being because the gospel reveals the only hope, the only hope for humanity that God provided a righteousness for us that none of us, even if we had all tried to get together and do it together, none of us could have achieved or produced the righteousness we need on our own.

So yes, Paul says, God gave us over to fester in that gutter and that cesspool of evil but God also gave Jesus over to be our righteousness.

Paul uses the very same word in Romans 8, 32. He says, God, who did not spare his own son, he gave him over for us all and Jesus left heaven and he was born willingly under the law and he came and he lived that godly, righteous life that we were meant to live and he gave himself over voluntarily to die for us to take our ungodliness and our unrighteousness upon himself and more than that to take upon himself the wrath of God, his holy hatred of evil so that we wouldn't have to bear it, so that we rather would get the righteousness of Christ placed upon us.

why is Paul so proud of the gospel? Why is he so pleased to announce this righteousness of God? Because nothing, nothing but the gospel is adequate to meet our terrible need under the wrath of God.

Paul's been very clear that nobody under the wrath of God will live. It all obviously ends in death and destruction but he says those who are righteous by faith in the righteousness of God they will live.

[34 : 06] That's the only way to experience the power that saves. If you're exploring Christianity we're so glad you're here and I hope that I've convinced you to at least consider that the main problem that we have as human beings is that we've turned away from God and therefore the only solution to that problem is to turn ourselves back to God.

And if you're here and you're a Christian and you really believe these things that we're talking about today you will not long for a life of ease and rest and comfort because you will feel the burden and you will feel the great plight of humanity upon your very breast and you will begin to pray and cry out to God for revival.

Call out to God for spiritual awakening and an outpouring of the Holy Spirit so by the power of the God who saves more and more of the people living around us could come out from under the wrath of God and they could come and live joyfully and fully under the righteousness of God that's been provided for us in Jesus Christ.

As it is written the righteous by faith will live. Will live eternally. Will live abundantly. Thank God for that.

Let's pray to that end in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.