

Paul wrote his letter to the Romans to unify the local church for global mission through the right understanding and application of the Gospel.

Up to this point in the letter, Paul has been telling us about the Gospel:

- He was “set apart for the Gospel of God” (1:1), and lived that calling out by serving God “in [his] spirit in the preaching of the Gospel of His Son” (1:9). He longed to preach this Gospel to the Roman Church (1:15).
- The first thing he told us about the Gospel was that it is ancient, and God had “promised [it] beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures” (1:2).
- The Gospel, we learned, “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes...in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith” (1:16,17).

Now, from 1:18 to 3:20, Paul begins to explain why we all need the Gospel.

Wrath Revealed Right Now (1:18)

1:18 *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness...*

- Notice the parallel:

1:17	"...the righteousness of God..."	"...is revealed..."	"...from faith to faith..."
1:18	"...the wrath of God..."	"...is revealed..."	"...from heaven..."

While the proclamation of the Gospel reveals God’s saving righteousness for all who are believing, God from heaven reveals His wrath against unrighteousness.

- While we usually think about wrath as a future reality in the final judgment (and eternity), the New Testament does speak about God’s wrath as a present reality against unbelievers:

- “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but **the wrath of God abides** [present tense] **on him**” (John 3:36).
- “**The God Who inflicts** [present tense] **wrath is not unrighteous, is He?**” (Romans 3:5).
- “...no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things **the wrath of God comes** [present tense] **upon the sons of disobedience**” (Ephesians 5:3-6).

The Invisible God Has Made Himself Known to All (1:19,20)

The Revealing God (1:19)

1:19...because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

- I always give thanks for this: God reveals Himself in every aspect of His creation and in His Word. If He did not reveal Himself, we would not know of Him Who is the Source of our existence and all things eternally good and blessed. His very stooping down to reveal Himself to us – especially in our sin and rebellion against Him – is a grace to treasure every moment.
- The only reason we know of God and know anything about Him is because He has revealed it.

Natural Revelation (1:20)

1:20 *For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.*

- God Himself is invisible.¹ He is Spirit, and the very nature of Spirit (John 4:24) means it is not visible or comparable to anything visible in natural creation.²
- The very reality of creation itself – every single part of it – places a burden of responsibility on all of humanity. We know there is a Creator – what does He require of His creation? “...man was created to be a spectator of this formed world, and...eyes were given to him that he might, by looking on so beautiful a picture, be led up to the Author Himself” (John Calvin, 1539).
- Beware of these false teachings:
 - God is not one with His creation (pantheism). The Bible teaches that there is a creation/Creator distinction, or separation. He created all things, maintains all things at all times, and is omnipresent (present in all places), but is not

¹ Deuteronomy 4:12; John 1:18; 5:37; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17; 6:16; Hebrews 11:27; 1 John 4:12.

² We apprehend this easily of God the Holy Spirit – after all, “Spirit” is part of His title. However, God the Father is also invisible. Notice that in the Revelation, the seven-fold Spirit is described as being “sent out into all the earth” by the “Lamb standing, as if slain” (Revelation 5:6). These are the Persons of the Holy Spirit and Son given to us in the remarkable imagery of Revelation. When the Father is mentioned, however, we have no description – just the title “Him Who sat on the throne” (Revelation 5:7). In fact, He is primarily described in Revelation by His throne, that is, His sovereign reign. I believe that, even in heaven, we will not “see” the Father because He has no image. We will know Him and “see” Him in Jesus, Who is “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15; see also John 1:18; 14:7-9; Hebrews 1:3). The Son added humanity to His eternal and invisible deity in the incarnation. Without ceasing to be fully God, He became fully and really human. He now, in heaven, remains fully God and fully human. He is what we see of God, and always will be what we see of the Trinity.

- one with His creation. He does not need creation to exist.
- Creation is not His “body.” There is nothing divine about creation. The only “body” God can be said to have is the human body of Jesus Christ, which is one with the eternally divine Son.
- This being said, creation reveals many attributes about God, enough that even those who’ve never heard a preacher can still be held accountable as guilty before the judgment seat of God because they “did not honor Him as God or give thanks” (Romans 1:21). In fact, they “suppress the truth [as revealed in creation] in unrighteousness” (1:18).³

Specific Violations of God’s Commandments

(1:21-23)

All Have Violated God’s Third Commandment (1:21)

1:21 For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

³ God alone has *aseity* (a fancy theological term for self-contained existence – nothing causes Him to exist, He has always existed, and is Himself the source of all created existence). However, the greatest thinkers become guilty of Romans 1:18-23. For example, Stephen Hawking, in his popular *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), argues for a creation without beginning (which therefore needs no Creator): “So long as the universe had a beginning, we could suppose it had a creator. But if the universe is really completely self-contained, having no boundary or edge, it would have neither beginning nor end: it would simply be. What place, then, for a creator?” (pg. 140-141). Whereas God claims absolute Being in His name and nature (Exodus 3:14), Hawking gives it to creation. Whereas God claims eternity (Deuteronomy 33:27; Isaiah 9:6; Romans 16:26; 1 Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 9:14), Hawking gives it to creation.

- “...even though they knew God...” There are no atheists. There are those “who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (1:18), but there are no atheists.
 - Despite knowing God, they do not “honor,” or glorify Him. “Men are said to glorify God either when they ascribe glory to Him, or when they so act as to lead others to honor Him.”⁴ We cannot take away from or contribute to God’s glory.⁵ It is absolute. But we were created for the sole purpose of making His glory known and enjoying it forever. Fallen humanity is not doing what it was created to do.
 - Despite knowing God, they do not “give thanks.” As Martin Luther (1552) said, “the first step of their idolatry is ingratitude.” One of the most-repeated commands in Scripture to Christians is the command to give thanks to God through Jesus Christ for all things.⁶ READ Ephesians 5:4,20; Philippians 4:6; Colossians 3:17; 1 Thessalonians 5:18.
- Paul is making an accusation that humanity is in violation of the Third Commandment:
 - “You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in **vain** [ματαιω], for the Lord will not leave him unpunished who takes His name in **vain** [ματαιω]” (Exodus 20:7// Deuteronomy 5:11).

⁴ Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009, reprint from 1835), 38.

⁵ As C.S. Lewis said, “A man can no more diminish God’s glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word ‘darkness’ on the walls of his cell” (*Problem of Pain*, 1940).

⁶ In fact, Paul has already given thanks in 1:8 – for a people he’s never met face-to-face!

- “...even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became **futile** [εμματαιωθησαν] in their speculations” (1:21).
- The Third Commandment does not describe atheism or an ignorance of God, but a willful reimagining God according to our thoughts instead of God’s revelation of Himself in the Word. It is a vain thinking about God, or a vain speaking about God. Vanity, as a biblical category, means emptiness or worthlessness.
- When we separate our thinking/speaking about God from how He has revealed Himself in creation and/or the Scriptures, our efforts are worthless and in violation of God’s Law. Violation of God’s Law requires punishment, for God is righteous. He always judges rightly and never leaves lawlessness unpunished.
- When people say things about God that are contrary to what He has said about Himself in Scripture, they are being “*futile in their speculations.*” They are not just lying about God, but accusing Him of lying, since they are denying what He has said about Himself.
- This is not new, but original to the beginning of human history. READ Genesis 3:1-6. The serpent’s point of attack was “*has God said.*” He challenged whether God’s Word was true (3:1). He directly contradicted God’s Word (3:4). He accused God of having false motives in what He commanded, and promised blessings for violating those commands (3:5). And then the woman considered that which was forbidden by God to be “*good for food...a delight to the eyes...desirable to make one wise*” (3:6). Eve listened to the serpent lie about God and His Word, and she became “*futile in [her] speculations.*” John puts this continuing triple-temptation in language that touches our daily lives: **READ 1 John 2:15,16.**

All Have Violated God’s Second Commandment (1:22,23)

1:22 Professing to be wise, they became fools, 1:23 and 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.

- Humanity is guilty of violating the Second Commandment: **READ Exodus 20:4-6// Deuteronomy 5:8-10.**
- Idolatry is not just replacing God with something else: idolatry can be calling something God that is not. When Aaron fashions the golden calf and introduces it to the people, he says, *“This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt”* (Exodus 32:4). Aaron doesn’t introduce the golden calf by the name of some Egyptian or Canaanite god, but uses the exact self-description the one true God uses.⁷ Thinking of and describing the one true God using the imagery of creation is not accurate, and, therefore, is a lie about God.
- Further, in teaching about the golden calf incident to the Corinthian Church, Paul doesn’t mention the calf itself at all when warning against idolatry:
 - He warns the Church *“not [to] be idolaters,”* and then quotes Exodus 32:4, *“the people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play”* (1 Corinthians 10:7). He then gives us other examples from the life of Israel during the Exodus to elaborate on what the sin was:
 - It was acting *“immorally”* (1 Corinthians 10:8, referring to Numbers 25).
 - It was trying the Lord (1 Corinthians 10:9, referring to Numbers 21).

- It was grumbling against the Lord (1 Corinthians 10:10, referring to Numbers 16:41; 17:5,10).
- Paul ends this teaching by warning them to *“flee from idolatry”* (1 Corinthians 10:14). Idolatry is not just creating a statute and bowing down to it, but choosing to obey fleshly desires rather than God’s commands, testing God by assuming against His grace while willfully sinning against Him, and being ungrateful, untrusting, and complaining against Him. These things, according to Paul, are expressions of idolatry.
- Paul will tell the Colossian Church to live a life focused on the heavenly Christ, considering ourselves as dead to earthly temptation (Colossians 3:1-5). He gives a list of such temptations. The last is *“greed, which amounts to idolatry”* (3:5). How does God react to this idolatry masquerading as greed? *“For it is because of these things that the wrath of God will come upon the sons of disobedience”* (3:6). This sounds like Romans 1:18-23, doesn’t it?
- The apostle John ends his first letter with this pastoral warning: *“Little children, guard yourselves from idols”* (1 John 5:21). We may read through John’s entire letter and never find statues or images mentioned once. To what does the last verse refer? John is clear throughout his letter that knowledge of and relationship with God come only through Jesus Christ. Idolatry, then, is an attempt to relate to or describe God in any way apart from Christ.
- Paul says humanity *“exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man”* (Romans 1:23). I regularly hear people – even believers – do this. One of the most damning indictments God makes against humanity is *“you thought I was just like you”* (Psalm 50:21). Rather than heeding the Scriptures, people trust their own reasoning, feelings, or desires, and then assert

⁷ Ironically, God uses this self-description when He introduces the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2//Deuteronomy 5:6).

“The Wrath of God Revealed” from Romans 1:18-23 (NASB)
Pastor Michael Head – Indian Hills Baptist Church, Silver City, NM
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that God is on their side! Remember: God will never, never, never violate His Word. He is not like us (Isaiah 55:8,9). When we rely on our thoughts or feelings about God and His will, we are idolaters.⁸ We imagine a false imagination and call it “God.”

⁸ I repeat this truth to myself regularly: *“There is a way which seems right to a man, but its ends is the way of death”* (Proverbs 14:12//25). Really think about this statement. It *“seems right to a man.”* It looks good, feels good, and probably has support from all your friends. But if it is not found in Scripture, it is probably a path to spiritual (and perhaps emotional and physical) death.