

Guilty

Our text in the Word of God this morning is **Romans 1.18-23**. I encourage you to open your Bibles to that location.

This portion of God's word is not easy to hear. It is probably safe to say that it requires a healthy dose of humility and submission to the Lord to hear and follow. So before we begin, let's speak to our God in prayer as we ask Him to help us....

Now let's *hear* God speak to us from this text: read (including some context) **Romans 1.15-23**.

Understanding the truth of this passage of Scripture requires a generous dose of humility because it speaks of us and of our world as we truly are in our natural bent as human beings. Our natural tendency is to *not* see the world in this way.

Applying this text also requires a healthy dose of submission to our Lord because we do not—by our human nature—want to believe what is here. We want to think better of ourselves than what God says about us. In this text our God has given us a very clear *spiritual* worldview. In other words, we find here the reality of life as we know it—not life on this earth, but life in terms of eternity.

Last week we noticed the drive in the Apostle Paul to proclaim the gospel—the good news of Jesus—everywhere he went, and that we ought to have the same character qualities that drove him to do so. The reason, we discovered, for being eager to proclaim the message is because the gospel contains the power of God for salvation.

This is important for us to understand. The gospel is the power *of God* for *our* salvation. Make sure you hear what that means! It means someone needs saving. Someone needs rescuing. Someone needs deliverance. Someone needs help. Those are terms of salvation, and the “someones” are every single person who has ever lived. Chapter three makes that explicitly clear.

At this point in the text we have seen that everywhere the Apostle travels, there are people in need of salvation. They may be Jews, they may be Greeks, or they may be barbarians—the Roman term for those of other nationalities.

In our world, that means the people we rub shoulders with on a regular basis need the saving work of God. That includes the people we work with, the people we bump into with our shopping carts, as well as the checkers adding up our purchases, and the neighbors we can't stand, and those we enjoy, the children you teach at school, and their parents, and the kids your own children play with, as well as our family members. You get the picture!

The point is *people need saving*, and it is *God*, through His own power, who saves them by means of the gospel. Those in need of salvation do not save themselves. Many have tried, and all who have tried have failed. Mankind cannot provide this particular saving work for himself. It is strictly *God's* power that reaches out to save those who are in need of salvation.

That means any effort placed into gaining or earning one's salvation with God is pointless and senseless. It is wasted effort. Any effort to give to the church or another ministry because it might gain you points with God is wasted money in terms of gaining you anything with God.

Praying, or attending church, or trying to be a good moral person in hopes that you will be accepted is wasted effort in terms of pleasing God, and gaining salvation through those means because it is *God's* power that saves, not human effort of any kind.

Anyone who prays or worships another God other than the triune God of Scripture is wasting their time and energy, and is only deceiving himself into some form of temporary happiness in a sin-cursed world.

The means by which people receive God's saving power on their behalf is through faith. Note what it says in **v. 15**: "*for everyone who believes.*" *Believes* is the verb form of *faith*. Specifically, faith in Jesus and what He has done.

Verse 17 amplifies that a bit more. "*For in it...*" It is the gospel. In the gospel is revealed the righteousness of God. When the gospel message is proclaimed, a form of revelation is taking place. God is making known to people something of Himself, and that revelation is so powerful that it saves those who believe in it.

Specifically, that revelation is of God's righteousness. "*For in it the righteousness of God is revealed...*" What does that mean? This term is used often throughout this letter, and we will come back to it again in other contexts, but here it is clearly connected with God's powerful, saving activity in the gospel.

That is a helpful beginning, but it might be more helpful to go back to Genesis to begin to understand this. We remember that Abraham said to the Lord as they were overlooking Sodom and Gomorrah, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?"

This is a character trait of God: He will do what is right because He *is* right, in Himself. There is no untruth, no lie, no deception, no injustice, no going through loopholes with God. He is and does what is right, all the time, and in everyway. And that "rightness" of God is here applied to the saving power of God through the gospel.

Now notice how the Psalms portray this character trait of God:

Psalms 143.1, "*Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my pleas for mercy! In Your faithfulness answer, in your righteousness! Enter not into judgment with your servant, for no one is righteous before You.*"

Psalms 143.11, "*For Your name's sake (note Romans 1.5), O Lord, preserve my life! In your righteousness bring my soul out of trouble!*"

Do you see the connection between God's name and His righteousness? These are the reasons God saves. God saves through the gospel for the sake of His name and His glory. He does not save because we are worth being saved. He does not save because there is some value in us that God must have. He saves because it brings Him glory and magnifies His name.

And it is through His saving work that His righteousness character and actions are displayed as He declares those He saves to also be righteous. Through His powerful saving work, we are declared to be righteous, not through what we do, but because His righteousness becomes our own.

A good summary might be **Philippians 3.8-9**, "*Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For His sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I might gain Christ and be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith....*"

The means by which that takes place is found back in **Romans 1.17**: “*from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’*” This statement is emphatic. It is like saying, “It begins and ends with faith. Period, just like the OT has always said.”

Okay...we’ve made it through the introduction! And it is all to say this: the good news of Jesus, which we should all be eager to proclaim, makes an astounding claim.

The Claim of the Gospel: God’s powerful saving grace is only revealed through faith in Christ Jesus.

The gospel tells us that God’s power to save is available. And it tells us that God’s saving activity—His righteousness—is extended to save those whom God calls and who through faith believe in the proclaimed message.

In other words, the claim that God makes is that there is only one way to heaven, one way to God, one means of salvation, and that road is the narrow road of faith in Christ. There is no other way. And that is why the Apostle is so eager to proclaim the message. Not only is it powerful, not only is it God’s means of salvation, but it is the only way.

Let’s put that into perspective:

- **Mormons** consider Jesus to be the created brother of Satan
- **Muslims** consider Jesus to be just a prophet, and a step below Mohammed, at that.
- **Roman Catholics** consider Jesus to be insufficient, since His sacrifice needs to be continually repeated in the mass
- **Jews** consider him to be an egomaniac who was a false Messiah
- **Atheists** consider Him to be a moral teacher and/or a lunatic
- **Liberals** consider Him to be merely a moral teacher
- **All of us** tend to make Him into something after our own image.

We are surrounded by false gospels, and millions and billions of people have placed their faith in these false gospels! But what God reveals to us in His good news is this: If people don’t get Jesus right, they haven’t gotten the message right, and if they don’t get the message, they don’t get God’s righteousness, and if they don’t receive God’s righteousness on their behalf, they are not saved.

And...here is the step-on-our-toes part: if people don’t *hear* God’s revelation through the gospel, they will not believe, so we, like the Apostle, must be eager to proclaim the message.

You will notice that **v. 18** begins with the word “for,” introducing the reason. In other words, the author is anticipating a question: Why is faith in God’s revealed righteousness through the gospel of Christ the only way to receive God’s power in salvation?

The answer to that has to do with another aspect of God’s revelation. This time it is not in the gospel, or in Scripture, but in what God has created. This revelation in creation also makes a particular claim:

The Claim of Creation: God is full of wrath against all without faith in the powerful gospel of God.

This is why the God’s revelation through the gospel is so important. Everyone who does not exercise faith in the gospel message is continually and ultimately under the wrath of God.

You will notice that the righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, but the *wrath* of God is revealed in creation. What exactly does that mean? First, we must understand that a proper perspective of God includes His wrath. He is a God of love. That is one of His attributes, just like holy and righteous, and other characteristics.

Wrath is not one of God's characteristics that we generally consider. Many have said that if we were to make up our own god, we would never arrive at the God of the Bible. And in our own ways, we seek to remake Him to keep out those things about Him that make us uncomfortable.

The reality is, God is righteous and holy, and that means that sometimes the most loving thing for Him to do is to express wrath against that which is not right and holy. For example:

- **Exodus 4.14**, Moses is complaining that he is not able to be an adequate speaker for God's work. *"Then the anger of the Lord was kindled against Moses and He said, 'Is there not Aaron, your brother, the Levite? I know that he can speak well.'" God's wrath was enflamed when Moses questioned God's ability.*
- **Exodus 15.7**, *"In the greatness of Your majesty You overthrow Your adversaries; you send out Your fury; it consumes them like stubble."*
- **Exodus 32.10-11**, at the worshipping of the golden calf, God said to Moses, *"Now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them..."*
- **Jeremiah 21.5**, God says to the people of Israel, *"I myself will fight against you with outstretched hand and strong arm, in anger and in fury and in great wrath."*

The idea of God's wrath does not make us comfortable, but then again it is not meant to comfort us; it is meant to drive us to repentance, which is the point of this revelation.

As we see here in the text, the wrath of God is revealed against sin: against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men. This could be a reference to the Ten Commandments. The first parts of the Commandments speak of actions against God, while the second portion is more about sins against others.

We can't be certain about that, but at the very least this is speaking about sins against God and general sins that simply are not right actions. God's wrath is revealed against these things. God had made it known that He is not happy with sin. In fact, He is full of measured, controlled holy anger that will result in judgment at some point.

This wrath is directed toward "men" – that is, toward people in general who suppress the truth in their sin. You might picture it in this way: God sends a letter to sinful mankind that reveals how full of wrath He is, and mankind takes that letter, throws it to the ground and stomps on it as they turn their backs and walk away.

At this point we might begin to be a little defensive. We might argue that not all people do that. There are some good people in the world. There are some moral people in the world who do not sin to the same extent as others.

If that is how you are feeling, calm down for a minute and let God finish what He's saying here. Why does God display His wrath against sin to people? That's what **v. 19** answers: *"For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them."*

Do you see what is happening here? God took it upon Himself to be merciful by letting humanity know that He is full of wrath against our sin. God took the initiative to make it clear. It is plain. And it is plain because God made it plain. And humanity has seen it.

And the worst part of this is that humanity saw what God revealed, and flung it to the ground, saying, “Yeah? So, what?”

This just gets harder to grasp with every sentence! What we’re seeing is that God revealed Himself to mankind. Specifically, God revealed that He was not happy with sin. He is full of wrath. But mankind doesn’t care that God is full of wrath.

It is almost as if the Apostle Paul is anticipating our difficulty in wrapping our brains around this, because he explains it in greater detail in **v. 20**...

The thesis here is that God very plainly made mankind aware of His wrath against sin. The question is “how?” So here we go: God, being an invisible spirit, has invisible attributes. Specifically, there are two that are important here: his eternal power and divine nature.

We’ve already seen in this chapter that God is powerful. We saw that in the resurrection (**v. 4**), in the saving power of the gospel (**v. 16**), and now here. God has revealed that He is a powerful God. And...He has made it clear that He is, indeed *God!*

These two characteristics of God “have been clearly perceived” by everyone who sins. Every single human being *knows* that God is powerful and that God is God. We know that because God has made it very clear. How has He made it clear? “...*ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made.*”

Hear this, friends: a powerful God created the world we live in, and we can see the truth of a powerful God in this creation. Implicit in this truth is that God did indeed create this world, and He did it with His own power, and since He is this powerful Creator-God, we better make sure we please Him. We better be sure we do not sin against Him and incur His wrath.

The problem is that the natural reaction of man to this revelation is not to do what pleases God, but to take any revelation of Him and suppress it, push it down, squash it as if it were meant for the trash compacter.

This is the good and the bad with science, all rolled into one. Science is good in that it looks at our world and seeks to understand it. But it only reaches it’s ultimate good as it seeks to understand it as God intended it. The problem is that mans natural tendency is to ignore what creation says, or at worst, reject what they find out of hand because they don’t like it, and so science tends to ignore or suppress God.

This is **the response of mankind**: “We want nothing to do with the Creator-God.”

“For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”

I don’t know what is the most astounding part of that statement. Perhaps it is the “knowing.” They *knew* God. Do you get that? Every human being that has ever walked this planet has knowledge of God—remember, they have knowledge because God made it plain to them. There is not a single person who has ever existed who can say that they don’t know the Creator-God who is full of wrath against sin.

No one can ever stand before God and say to Him, “I didn’t know!” God has made it plain; He has clearly revealed Himself. There is no excuse.

So here is what takes place: Every human being, including you and me, can look at the world in which we live and deduce from it that there is a powerful God who made everything. And that powerful God needs to be worshipped and obeyed.

But we don’t do that. We don’t worship God as the powerful God who made everything that is. We don’t give Him thanks for making a world in which we can live and bring Him glory. We do none of those things.

Instead, our thought process becomes senseless—that’s the meaning of the word “futile” in **v. 21**. We take God’s truth revealed in creation and we stomp on it, thinking we know better. We think we are wiser than that, but in reality we discard the truth for a lie and so become foolish and senseless.

What other way is there to describe someone who chooses to ignore what the powerful God of the universe has clearly shown us?

Sadly, it does not end there. Sinful human beings in general are not content to ignore and suppress God’s revelation. Notice what **v. 23** says, “...and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”

There is a refusal to see what God has made clear, which in turn results in foolish thinking which leads to simply being fools. And this is what fools do: they take the unimaginable glory of the powerful God—the same being who revealed Himself from heaven, and they toss it aside. In the place of the glorious God they choose to worship cockroaches.

Jeremiah 2.11 says, “*Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But My people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this: be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.*”

What a picture! God speaks of His chosen people rejected Him—rejecting His glory, and preferring other gods. It’s as if they said they didn’t want to have the living, flowing waters of God but instead wanted broken cisterns that were no good.

That is the picture of mankind presented in Romans 1.

What does this mean? How are we to make sense of this? First, we need to understand that what God reveals of Himself in creation is not sufficient to save anyone. The only revelation of God that is sufficient to save is the good news of God of the Son. That is the power of God for salvation.

No one can receive God’s gift of salvation without faith in the Person of the gospel. That is why everyone must hear, and why we must be eager to proclaim the message.

Second, the revelation of God in creation is sufficient to condemn. I remember my dad teaching me some basic woodworking skills as a young boy, and one of the skills that I struggled to grasp at that time was how important it was to sand something sufficiently.

My dad tried to teach me what was sufficient—and especially that the end grain on a block of wood needed more sanding because if scratches were left there, they would show up much more prominently when the wood was stained.

Well, I'm sure you already know the end of the story. I sanded something to my own standards of sufficiency, which were clearly not high enough. As a result, when I stained it, my lack of sanding was clearly evident. My dad said to, "I tried to tell you to sand it more."

That is the point of this text, friends. As people who live in God's creation, we have no excuse for not receiving God's revelation of Himself in it. Since we, by our very nature, suppress that knowledge, we are without excuse. No one—whether they live in Wisconsin, or California, or New York, or England, or Spain, or the jungles and deserts of Africa, or the rainforests of South America, or the steppes of Russia—no one can ever say "I didn't know."

We all—whether by active or passive decision—reject God's revelation to us of His power and deity. We do not worship Him. We do not give thanks to Him. Instead, we'd rather worship other people or snakes or cockroaches before we give God any glory.

In a practical sense this is what that means: **(the impact of the gospel and creation on the human race)**: Every single person who does not respond in faith to God's revelation through the gospel is guilty before God and stands to be condemned.

No one can complain that God isn't just, because they know better. God showed them. In essence, every person stands guilty and condemned before God because we suppressed His truth and exchange Him for something more like us. Every person *chose* to reject God's truth. Everyone has an opportunity, and doesn't respond.

But here is the glory of grace: God revealed Himself again, not *through* creation, but *within* His creation. He came Himself, demonstrating powerfully through the resurrection that He is the Creator-God who is able to save everyone who believes in Him. Through that message He arrests, if you will, those who have already rejected Him, and turns their hearts to Himself.

God would be perfectly just and righteous to simply let mankind reject Him and face the judgment for their choice and sins. But He determined to reveal Himself again—this time by demonstrating His righteousness in salvation.

This picture is the reality of life. Where do you fit within it?