

# Righteousness in Romans

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Solomon never wrote more truly than when he opined in Ecclesiastes 1 that there is nothing new under the sun. Technology may change, the boundaries of nations may change, but people stay basically the same. We come up with a new toy like the Internet, but we use it to express the same sort of lust that has plagued mankind ever since the days of David and Bathsheba. There is nothing in the heart of man today that would have surprised Solomon or even Noah.

This is not something that modern Americans want to admit. We want to believe that we're smarter, that we're wiser, that we're able to rise above the petty moral restrictions that troubled our forefathers. Our new understanding has helped us to re-focus our values on important things, like tolerance and the environment, instead of listening to God.

In reality, this way of thinking is not new. It is very, very old. When man chooses to depart from God, he ends up walking in exactly the same steps that his ancestors walked 2000 years ago when they chose to depart from God. None of these departures come as a surprise to Him. There is nothing that the people around us are doing today that God's word does not predict, not because the Bible contains precise prophecies about our era, but because it expresses a precise understanding of the heart of man. Our problems today are the same, and the solution that God prescribed for those problems then is still just as effective. Let's consider this as we study righteousness in Romans.

## The Mind of the Unrighteous

The first of the contexts that we're going to explore this morning deals with the mind of the unrighteous. We find this context in Romans 1:18-23. It begins by discussing the cheerful, uplifting topic of **THE WRATH OF GOD**. Paul has just gotten through talking about how one of the things that makes the gospel important is that it reveals the righteousness of God. Here, though, Paul brings up the other side of the coin. Note that he doesn't say that the wrath of God *will be* revealed against the wicked. He says that the wrath of God *is* revealed against the wicked.

In other words, once a society turns its back on God, and the society begins to decay in certain predictable ways, that process of decay represents the working of the wrath of God. It's common for preachers to warn that if America continues down its present corrupt course, God will judge us. I don't think that's what this is saying. Instead, all of the wickedness springing up around us is the consequence of the judgment that God has already pronounced. The keystone sin, the one that Paul says causes God to unleash His wrath on a nation, is the unrighteous suppression of the truth.

Paul explains this further in vs. 19-20. What we're talking about here is not truth in a 2+2=4 sense, but truth in the sense of **WHAT GOD HAS REVEALED** about Himself. If we want to know about God, all we have to do is walk out our front doors and take a look around. We can look up to the heavens and see infinity stretching before our eyes. We can get down on our hands and knees and find a little flower that nobody ever noticed before, yet see in that flower a marvel of beauty and complexity. The more we pay attention, the more we will realize that there is a God.

In fact, this is something that humanity everywhere has always recognized. Back when I was earning my religious-studies degree, I liked to take a lot of classes about non-Western religion. No matter what religion I studied, I found the same thing. All of these different faiths, as far-flung as they were, every one of them had a story about a transcendent creator god who made the heavens and the earth. Sure, the practitioners of those religions were too busy worshipping their lower-case-g gods to give him much thought, but all of them would tell you that he was there. Why? Because Native Americans and Africans and Indians are all smart enough to look around and say, "Somebody made this."

In fact, this is evident not just to the idolater, but to the atheist. I read an article in the *L.A. Times* about a month ago by a man named Lawrence Krauss. He began the article by saying, "The illusion of purpose and design is perhaps the most pervasive illusion about nature that science has to confront on a daily basis. Everywhere we look, it appears that the world was designed so that we could flourish." Of course, he then proceeded to explain why we should ignore all of the evidence of design in favor of a faith in a Godless universe, but I thought his opening sentences were very telling. They make me wonder how hard Dr. Krauss has to work every morning to convince himself again that there isn't a God. The point is, friends, that the existence of God is obvious, and, as Paul says, failure to acknowledge Him is inexcusable.

However, people refuse to acknowledge God all the time, and the first consequence of this is that they **BECOME FUTILE** in their thinking. At first glance, it's not apparent why Paul says this, but once we think about it, how could things be otherwise? If there is a transcendent creator God, which the universe says there is, then we obviously ought to do whatever we can to honor a Being so great and powerful. After all, if we don't honor Him, we might offend Him, and He might stomp us flat. Thus, even before we get to the Bible, only the God-centered life makes sense. If, by contrast, we ignore all the evidence and decide that we don't want to honor God, how can that possibly end well for us? Whatever else we think about, it can't possibly be as important as He is. Any thinking that does not incorporate God, then, is inevitably futile thinking. It can only darken the hearts of those who pursue it.

As the wicked continue in that pursuit, though, they also **BECOME FOOLS**. Interestingly enough, the fools are always the last to recognize this. I have a good friend who is a science professor in a major university. Naturally, most

of his colleagues are atheists who subscribe to the theory of evolution. What drives him crazy about them is not their unbelief. It is that they are so arrogant in their unbelief. They assume that anyone who isn't an atheist like them must be an idiot, because if he weren't an idiot, he would be an atheist. These are the people who have to drown out the voice of God every time they see a sunrise, and yet, they have the gall to make themselves out to be wiser than we are. They are so caught up in their philosophies and their charts that they reject the evidence in front of their noses.

Ultimately, those who walk this path **EXCHANGE GOD'S GLORY** for images of the physical creation. In context in this verse, Paul is probably talking about idolatry, and the human habit of making idols in the form of men and animals and insects, but in our society, haven't these words taken on a new life? Sure, all of those evolutionists deny the existence of God, but I don't think they're actually the atheists they claim to be. Ever watched one of those National Geographic specials and listened to the reverence in the voice of the narrator as he talks about "Mother Nature"? I think Mother Nature is their goddess. They have so much faith in Mother Nature that they believe she can take a protozoan and turn it into a human being. I don't know about you, friends, but Mother Nature seems like a terribly cruel goddess to serve. Mother Nature is destructive, savage and blind. However, she is the god they have fashioned.

As bad as Mother Nature is, though, she's better than the one remaining cultural idol—the idol of the self. Many who reject God turn to nature and the environment, but many simply begin to worship the guy in the mirror. How many people do we know who believe that the most important thing in their lives is for them to be happy? In their pursuit of self-worship, they may wreck their families, they may empty their bank accounts, but that's what their false god demands.

## God Gave Them Up

In our last section, we saw what mankind must do in order to provoke the wrath of God. All we have to do is to reject the testimony of the creation about its Creator and find some idol to worship instead of God. At that point, we can be certain that the wrath of God will be revealed as He gives us up to wickedness. Paul explains in Romans 1:24-32.

According to the text, the first sign of God's wrath is that He gives the wicked up **TO IMPURITY**. Once men start believing the lie, once they start worshipping themselves instead of God, He allows certain cultural barriers to fall, and some of the first to fall have to do with marriage and sex. The Hebrews writer tells us in Hebrews 12 that marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled. Here, though, the people Paul is describing are engaging in dishonorable sexual practices outside of the sanctity of marriage. They were familiar in his time, and they are familiar to us.

Let me give you an example. In our society today, the rate of divorce in first-time marriage is about 50 percent. It makes a mockery of what God intends to be a solemn, lifelong commitment. However, this rise in the divorce rate is not some new thing. Instead, it is very, very old. The Gentiles 2000 years ago swapped out spouses at a rate that would fit right in in Hollywood. Just to pick one example, Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor at the time of the birth of Christ, was married four times total to three different women, all before he became emperor. He divorced one of them, a woman named Scribonia, the very same day their daughter was born. Their divorce problem was worse than ours.

Nor should we think that it is some new thing for our society to be obsessed with sex, for the people around us to be engaged in immorality of every kind. Once again, there is nothing that the wicked of our day are doing that was not prevalent among the Gentiles 2000 years ago. Adultery? Absolutely. Fornication? Why not? Pornography? Well, let's put it like this. When the buried Roman city of Pompeii was first excavated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many of the murals that the archaeologists discovered on the walls were so shockingly explicit that the archaeologists reburied them. Of course, the same murals that horrified the men of a less wicked age would elicit nothing more than a shrug from the jaded Internet porn hounds of today. Just like the Romans, God has also given our nation over to impurity.

After this, the text tells us that God gives the wicked up **TO DISHONORABLE PASSIONS**. Despite the numerous arguments made by gay-rights advocates, I don't think there's any doubt what this portion of the text is doing. It is condemning the practice of homosexuality, and Paul couldn't get any more explicit about that practice without becoming indelicate. It's no secret to anyone that our society is yearly becoming more welcoming of homosexuality, and once again, many of the talking heads act like this is some new advance in human understanding, like we're better than our forefathers because we approve of this dishonorable passion. Once again, there is nothing new under the sun. Socrates and all the famous Greek philosophers were homosexuals. Alexander the Great was a homosexual. Too many Roman emperors to name were homosexuals. Modern America isn't blazing a new trail. We're walking a very old one.

It's also worth noting here that Paul presents this as a progression, that dishonorable passions follow on the heels of impurity. This has certainly been the case in our times. 50 years ago, we had the Sexual Revolution. Now, we're experiencing the homosexual revolution. There's a causal connection here, and interestingly enough, it's a causal connection pointed out by the enemies of God's word. When the leaders of so many churches condone heterosexual fornication with a wink and a nod, they also lose their moral standing to condemn the practice of homosexuality. When churches permit their members to trample all over the sanctity of marriage by divorcing and remarrying whenever they please, what right do those churches have to oppose gay marriage because it tramples all over the sanctity of marriage? Those are not separate issues. They are the same issue, and the issue is whether we are going to obey God's law in our

private lives or not. If we decide that we're not going to, who are we to condemn someone else because their preferred form of disobedience is different from ours? This is the fatal flaw to the conservative argument on many social issues today, and it is why in a few more years, our country will be entirely accepting of all manner of dishonorable practices.

After this, the bottom falls out. The final expression of God's wrath is that He gives its objects up **TO A DEBASED MIND**. As I said earlier, the U.S. seems to be progressing through these stages at a rate of one every fifty years. That means that I might see the final stage hit, but Zoë and Mark are probably going to be stuck with it. Notice that only one of the things on this list in vs. 29-31—murder—is a crime that the state punishes. Everything else here is legally permissible. When we reject the practices on this list, we do so not because we fear man, but because we fear God and wish to honor Him. Once our nation has decided not to honor God in the realm of sex, it won't be very long before everybody realizes that they don't have to honor God in any other areas of their lives either. After all, what logical basis do I have to insist that homosexuality is right, but gossip and boasting are wrong? God's law is of a piece. Either we take it all, or we take none of it, and as a nation, we are well on our way to none.

This process has already begun. I suspect any of the older brethren here would tell us that all of these evil activities are much more prevalent now than they were 50 years ago. However, when it comes to living in a wicked, godless society, we ain't seen nothing yet. There are already too many people who live their lives according to this pattern, and with each coming year, they will become more prevalent. What's more, all of these evil attributes will become more and more culturally endorsed. We have already begun to praise the proud, the contentious, the faithless, and the ruthless. Those are the traits that our nation believes are necessary to get ahead in an increasingly vicious, dog-eat-dog world. Soon, they will be the normal standard of behavior, the mark of a society that God has entirely rejected.

### The Righteousness of God

So then, we live in a crooked and perverse generation, a generation that manifests its crookedness and perversity in the same way that the crooked and perverse 2000 years ago manifested theirs. As our nation continues its search for what it imagines to be new rights and new freedoms, we only become more and more like the fallen Gentile nations that Paul condemned millennia ago. That's the bad news. The good news is that it was to a fallen society much like ours that the gospel first came, and it is through the gospel that we can find the righteousness of God. Paul explains in Romans 3:19-26. What he tells us here is going to be the basis of our reflections during the Lord's Supper.

The first point that Paul brings up in this context is **THE FAILURE OF THE LAW**. We might think that if the world invites the wrath of God by its wickedness, we can avoid that wrath by being righteous ourselves. Paul actually spends all of Romans 2 and the first part of Romans 3 explaining the problem with that. Even if we agree that we should honor God, that doesn't mean that we will please God on our own. Sure, our neighbors reject the idea that God has authority over them and disobey God's law. However, even though we acknowledge that authority, we still disobey.

The result of this for us is the same as it was for the self-righteous Jews 2000 years ago. We may think we're better, but in God's eyes, we're not actually better. The same word that condemns the world condemns us too. No matter how hard we try, we can never succeed in justifying ourselves through perfect law-keeping.

This is especially important for us to remember in the Lord's church today. As a brotherhood, we are scrupulous to observe all the statutes of the law. We should be scrupulous; God deserves our best. However, many brethren fall into the trap of believing that it is their very scrupulousness that preserves their relationship with God, and they live in fear that if they don't dot an i or cross a t, that will lead God to reject them. It's like we re-create the Old Testament pattern of salvation by works in a New Testament context. Brethren, it didn't work then, and it won't work now. None of us, no matter how devout, can hope to please God through our perfect adherence to His word.

How, then, if both the scoffer and the God-fearer have offended Him by their sin, how can anyone hope to be justified in His sight and preserved from the greater wrath to come? Paul finds his solution in **THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF FAITH**. The point here is that even though we rightly describe the New Testament system as the law of Christ, it is more than merely a system of law. It is a system of faith, and it is that faith, and not the law, that allows us to be righteous. All of us are unrighteous. We have no hope of ever becoming righteous through our own resources. God knew this would happen. Before the foundation of the world, He anticipated that man would reach this hopeless position. So that we could dwell with Him despite our sin, He planned an entirely separate scheme of righteousness. In order to be found righteous, we must place our faith in Jesus and His ability to make us righteous.

Paul elaborates further on this theme when he explains how we are **JUSTIFIED BY GRACE**. This sub-context begins with a verse that many of us have heard repeatedly: "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Taken by itself, this is a grim statement. Even in isolation, it is true, but when we read it in context, we see that Paul isn't using this passage to make a grim point. Indeed, the opposite is true. Here's what he's saying: Yes, all have sinned and fall short, but that's OK. None of us deserve to avoid the wrath of God, but that's OK. Even though we are personally unrighteous, God will justify us. He will remove all the imperfections from the record of our lives, so that we line up perfectly with the standard of His law. We have done nothing to earn God's favor, but He will extend that favor to us

anyway as an un-earned gift. Every one of us, whether we were “raised in the church” and have never really gone off the reservation, or whether we grew up in the world as wicked as could be, every one of us has fallen into the bondage of sin. However, our great hope is that we have been redeemed, bought back from slavery by Jesus Christ.

All of this sounds too good to be true. As the saying goes, there is no such thing as a free lunch, and salvation from our sins is a big lunch. Who’s paying for it? Paul explains that our salvation is only possible **BY THE BLOOD OF JESUS**. God’s law is perfect. God’s justice never misses. Every sin we commit invites Him to destroy us. Because we have sinned, somebody had to die. That somebody was Jesus. Because He lived a sinless life on earth, He never earned the wrath of God. Unlike all of us, Jesus was never a dead man walking. He still had a life to give that He didn’t already owe, and He gave that life for us. The blood that He shed on the cross functioned as a propitiation. It was a substitute death that God accepted in place of our own, with the consequence that in His dealings with us, He could still be perfectly just, perfectly true to His law, and yet justify us despite the record of our sin. Nor is this true for us alone. This is why God held His wrath in check for thousands of years, watching sin after sin and rebellion after rebellion, and yet did not blot out man entirely. With one sacrifice, Jesus purchased redemption for everyone who had ever trusted in God, and for everyone who will ever trust in God. If we believe in Jesus’ power to save, He will save us too.

This, friends, is what it means to be a Christian. We are a holy people, but that holiness is not the result of our own works. We are a dedicated people, but that dedication does not save us. Instead, we became children of God because we were cleansed with the blood of Jesus, and that great sacrifice is the only thing that stands between us and an eternity of torment, away from God forever. Let’s think about how much we owe as we partake of the Lord’s Supper.