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# ROMANS

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## PART 2: THE WRATH OF GOD AGAINST GENTILES

### ROMANS 1:18-32

#### ROMANS OVERVIEW

##### PROLOGUE (ROMANS 1:1-17)

1. **“THE WRATH OF GOD” (ROMANS 1:18-3:20)**
  - a. The Wrath of God against Gentiles (1:18-1:32) ← We are here
  - b. The Wrath of God against Jewish People (2:1-3:20)
2. **“THE GRACE OF GOD” (ROMANS 3:21-4:25)**
3. **“FREEDOM IN CHRIST” (ROMANS 5:1-8:39)**
4. **“BUT WHAT ABOUT THE ISRAELITES?” (ROMANS 9:1-11:36)**
5. **“THE GOSPEL IN EVERYDAY LIFE” (ROMANS 12:1-15:33)**

##### CLOSING (ROMANS 16:1-27)

#### **PART 2 OVERVIEW**

- Introduction to Romans 1:18-3:20
- Overview of Romans 1:18-32
- Understanding Paul’s Comments on Sex and Sexuality in Romans 1:26-27

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# INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS 1:18-3:20

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## THE PURPOSE OF ROMANS: A REMINDER

- As discussed last session, we get the impression reading through the book of Romans that there was a conflict going on in the church in Rome: Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were in disagreement with each other. Specifically, we get the impression that Jewish Christians were charging Gentile Christians with not respecting the privileged heritage and traditions of the Jewish people as the chosen people of God.
- Since one of Paul's main burdens is unity in God's church, Paul wrote this letter, therefore, to try and resolve this conflict.
- But rather than just say "get along," Paul decides to go about resolving this conflict in a deeply theological and well-reasoned approach:

Paul writes Romans with the aim of fostering unity in the Roman Church:  
he wants to show that all people—both Jews and Gentiles—  
are sinful by nature and therefore deserving of God's wrath.  
The only way anybody can be a part of the people of God, therefore,  
is by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

- By establishing that all people are deserving of God's wrath, and, therefore, that all people obtain salvation solely through God's grace, Paul hopes to erase any "superiority" that the Jewish Christians feel towards the Gentiles Christians, fostering unity in the church.
- The first thing Paul has to do, therefore, is establish that all people are sinful and deserving of God's wrath. **This is what Paul does in Romans 1:18-3:20.**

## ROMANS 1:18-3:20

- Paul's purpose in the first major section of Romans (1:18-3:20) is to show how all people are sinful and thus deserving of God's wrath (and therefore in need of God's grace). Romans 1:18-19 serves as the "thesis statement" for this section:

*<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, <sup>19</sup> because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. – ROMANS 1:18-19*

## INTRODUCTION TO ROMANS 1:18-3:20

- Paul's main point in this section will be that **though people know what God wants from them, they fail to do it, and this failure to do what God wants them to do is sin that justifies God's wrath.**
- In order to make this point, Paul divides his argument into two parts:
  1. **First, Paul makes it clear that *Gentiles*—those without a Jewish heritage, background and upbringing—are sinful and thus deserving of God's wrath (1:18-1:32).**<sup>1</sup> For Paul's Jewish Christian readers, making this point is relatively easy! They already knew and believed that Gentiles were deserving of God's wrath, and Paul doesn't need to do much persuading here. That's why he only devotes 15 verses to it!
  2. **Second, Paul wants to show that *Jewish people* are also sinful and thus deserving of God's wrath (2:1-3:20).** This is much more difficult for Paul to establish from the vantage point of Paul's Jewish readers. The Jews were the chosen people of God! How could they be deserving of God's wrath? That is why Paul spends almost two full chapters unfolding his point here. (This is the section we will look at in our next session.)

### FINALLY, A WORD ABOUT "GOD'S WRATH"

- Paul begins the first major section of Romans by reminding his readers of an important, but seldom discussed (in today's times) aspect of God's character: His justified anger and wrath against sin and sinful mankind:

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

- Though we don't like to discuss God's wrath, it is an integral part of His Holiness *and* His loving nature: there is no way that God can be a God of love if He doesn't also have anger against those who do harm to others in His creation.
- Paul's point in Romans 1:18-3:20 will be that all human beings are deserving of this wrath—and therefore, we are all in need of God's grace if we are going to escape that wrath. (Remember: there is no good news if there isn't bad news first!). As said, he begins first by discussing Gentiles.

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 1:18-19 does double duty both as the topic sentence for the whole first section of Romans (1:18-3:20) and as the opening of Paul's argument about Gentiles deserving God's wrath (1:18-32).

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# OVERVIEW OF ROMANS 1:18-32

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## GENTILES DESERVE GOD'S WRATH (1:18-32)

- As stated, Paul makes it clear that the reason why people deserve God's wrath is because although they know what God wants them to do, they fail to do it. This failure to do what God wants them to do is sin, and that is what brings about God's wrath.
- But on its surface, this might seem to raise a problem when it comes to Gentiles. Gentiles don't believe in God and don't know what God wants for them—they don't have the Old Testament Law. How can they be deserving of God's wrath?
- Paul's point is this: God has revealed enough of Himself in the world to know generally what He wants of them. Gentiles don't even follow this; they suppress the "truth" of what God has revealed and do their own thing, revealing their sin.

*<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who **suppress the truth in unrighteousness**, <sup>19</sup> **because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them**. <sup>20</sup> 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**. – ROMANS 1:18-20*

- Paul then cites several examples of this "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness":
  1. Though Gentiles could look at the world around them and declare that there must be an invisible God that created them and everything in the world, and then seek to find *that* God, the Gentiles instead worship creation rather than the Creator:

*<sup>24</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Professing to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> **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...** <sup>24</sup> **For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.***

– ROMANS 1:21-23, 24

## OVERVIEW OF ROMANS 1:18-32

2. Though Gentiles generally understand morality and that it is wrong to harm or do wrong to other people, not only do they regularly do that—but they approve of those who do:

*28 And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, 29 being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; 32 and **although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.***

– ROMANS 1:28-32

3. Though Gentiles can look to nature and understand that God designed men and women to be in relationship with each other, some of them regularly go against nature and engage in same-sex relationships.

*26 For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. – ROMANS 1:26-27*

- Thus Paul's point is clear: even those who don't believe in the God of the Bible are "without excuse" (1:20) before Him. God has revealed enough in the world and in people's hearts for them to know generally what He wants. But the Gentiles reject that and willingly engage in sin. This makes them deserving of God's wrath.

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# UNDERSTANDING PAUL'S COMMENTS ON SEX AND SEXUALITY IN ROMANS 1:26-27

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## ROMANS 1:26-27

- This is what then leads to an examination of Romans 1:26-27:

*<sup>26</sup> For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the **natural** function for that which is **unnatural**, <sup>27</sup> and in the same way also the men abandoned the **natural** function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error. – ROMANS 1:26-27*

- The key words in this passage (in light of Paul's argument in Romans 1:18-32) are "**natural**" and "**unnatural**."

- Remember what Paul is trying to do in this passage. He is trying to prove that God has made His desires clear from how He has made the world, and that even though Gentiles/pagans can plainly see that, they don't do what God wants.
- For Paul, one of the most natural things that we can see in the way that God has designed the world is that men are designed for women and women are designed for men (even down to our physical anatomies).
- The fact that so many Gentile/pagan religions denied that and approved of same-sex behavior was a sign that the people generally don't care about God or what He wants—the very definition of sin.
- Thus in this passage, Paul is making it clear that engaging in homosexual practice is a violation of God's desires—thus, a sin.

"It is clear that Paul depicts homosexual activity as a violation of God's created order, another indication of the departure from true knowledge and worship of God."

- Douglas Moo, *The Letter to the Romans*

"Human beings were intended to have sexual relations with those of the opposite sex. Just as idolatry is a perversion of what God intended, so too homosexual relations are contrary to what God planned when he created man and woman."

- Thomas Schreiner, *Romans*

- It is important to note that Paul (and the rest of the Bible) does not condemn homosexual *attraction*. It is the acting out upon that attraction that Paul condemns. **Romans 1:26-27 makes it clear that engaging in a same-sex relationship or encounter is prohibited by God and therefore a sin.**

# UNDERSTANDING PAUL’S COMMENTS IN ROMANS 1:26-27

## THREE OBJECTIONS?

- Not everyone believes, however, that the Bible outright prohibits same-sex relationships. There are, generally, three different objections that people bring up to the classic interpretation of Romans 1:26-27 and other biblical passages seemingly condemning same-sex relationships.

1. **The “older” / “younger” argument.** Some believe that Paul is not condemning same-sex relationships outright, but a certain type relationship seen especially in the Roman Empire at this time, where there is a “older” same-sex partner in a relationship and a “younger” one (pederasty). This argument, however, does not make sense of Romans 1:26-27 which prohibits simply “men with men” (1:27). Further, what Paul says in Romans 1 needs to be read in light of the context of the Old Testament, which unequivocally banned any sexual relationships between people of the same gender.

*Do not have sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman; that is detestable.*  
– LEVITICUS 18:22 NIV

*If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable.* – LEVITICUS 20:13A NIV

If Paul was writing to primarily address Christians from a Jewish background (which appears to be the case—see Romans 2:17), he knew that the Jewish faith prohibited any type of same-sex relationship outright. Paul affirms this teaching in Romans.

2. **Maybe God changed His mind?** Some will agree that the Old Testament outright condemns sexual relationships between people of the same gender, but these same people will hold open the possibility that God changed his mind from the Old to New Testament. Noting (rightly) that the Old Testament Law no longer applies to Christians—a point that Paul will make later in Romans—some will argue that in the same way that the Old Testament prohibits the eating of certain foods, but the New Testament allows for the eating of those same foods, maybe the Old Testament prohibited same-sex relationships, but under Jesus these are now allowed. The problem with this interpretation is that although there are several places in the New Testament where Christians are explicitly told they no longer have to abide by the food laws (cf. Mark 7:19; Acts 11:19; Romans 14:14), there is no analogous verse for same-sex relationships. Crucially, **whenever the Bible talks about same-sex practice, it never talks about it in a positive light.** In addition to Romans 1:26-27, same-sex behavior is condemned in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and 1 Timothy 1:8-11:

*<sup>9</sup> Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor **men who have sex with men** <sup>10</sup> nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.* – 1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-10 NIV

*<sup>8</sup> We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. <sup>9</sup> We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, <sup>10</sup> for the sexually immoral, **for those practicing homosexuality**, for slave traders and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine <sup>11</sup> that conforms to the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me.* – 1 TIMOTHY 1:8-11 NIV

## UNDERSTANDING PAUL'S COMMENTS IN ROMANS 1:26-27

3. **But what about Jesus?** Finally, some people have observed that though Paul addresses same-sex relationships, Jesus never did. Some have suggested, therefore, that this was meant by Jesus to signal support for them, and therefore we should look to Jesus and not Paul for our teaching on this subject. It is highly unlikely, however, that Jesus' failure to mention same-sex relationships signals His support for it. Jesus' context was the Jewish faith which unambiguously prohibited these relationships (see Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, above). Since Jesus had no problem correcting errant teaching in His day (see, for example, the "You have heard...but I say..." statements of Matthew 5:21, 27 and 31), the fact that Jesus never said anything about same-sex relationships suggests that He affirmed the Old Testament's teaching on that subject. Further, Jesus also very clearly affirmed the biblical teaching that marriage was to be between a man and a woman:

*<sup>4</sup> And [Jesus] answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, <sup>5</sup> and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?'" - MATTHEW 19:4-5*

"The New Testament offers no loopholes or exception clauses that might allow for the acceptance of homosexual practices under some circumstances. Despite the efforts of some recent interpreters to explain away the evidence, the New Testament remains unambiguous and univocal in its condemnation of homosexual conduct."

- Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*

### TWO IMPORTANT POINTS

- It would be irresponsible, however, to leave the discussion there. True, an honest reading of Scripture indicates that homosexual practice is a sin. However, there are a couple of very important comments that must be made regarding this.

1. **Paul's point in Romans 1 is not to indicate that homosexual practice is the *worst* sin. It is just one among many that people commit.**

- Paul's discussion on same-sex relationships comes within a broader mention of "sexual impurity," which throughout the Bible includes also adultery.

*Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. - ROMANS 1:24 NIV*

- There is also no indication that same-sex behavior is considered "worse" by God than any of the sins that Paul mentions at the end of Romans 1, many of which are sins that all of us are guilty of.

*<sup>29</sup> being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup> without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; <sup>32</sup> and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. - ROMANS 1:29-32*

## UNDERSTANDING PAUL'S COMMENTS IN ROMANS 1:26-27

### 2. Just like every other sin, homosexual practice is a sin that is covered by the blood of Jesus.

"But one more thing must be said: Romans 1:18–32 sets up a homiletical sting operation. The passage builds a crescendo of condemnation, declaring God's wrath upon human unrighteousness, using rhetoric characteristic of Jewish polemic against Gentile immorality. It whips the reader into a frenzy of indignation against others: those unbelievers, those idol-worshippers, those immoral enemies of God. But then, in Romans 2:1, the sting strikes: 'Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.' The reader who gleefully joins in the condemnation of the unrighteous is 'without excuse' before God (2:1), just as those who refuse to acknowledge God are 'without excuse' (1:20). The radical move that Paul makes is to proclaim that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, stand equally condemned under the just judgment of a righteous God. Consequently, for Paul, self-righteous judgment of homosexuality is just as sinful as the homosexual behavior itself."

- Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*

*<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. – ROMANS 3:23-24*

*<sup>9</sup> Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men <sup>10</sup> nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> **And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.** – 1 CORINTHIANS 6:9-11*

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# APPLICATION: FROM THEOLOGY TO PRACTICE

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1. As stated, I do not think that the Bible can be made to say that homosexual practice is anything other than a sin. **To honor God is to abstain from any and all same-sex practice.**
2. At the same time, I do not think that the Bible teaches that those who find themselves attracted to people of the same sex “chose” this attraction.
3. For that reason, it may seem unfair to say that others need to be denied the same love, affection, and companionship that many of us take for granted, simply because we don’t struggle with something the Bible prohibits.
4. At the same time, however, to follow Jesus is to follow His Word. And often that means giving up natural desires and impulses for the sake of a higher calling—as difficult as that may be.

*For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—**and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.** – MATTHEW 19:12 NIV*

5. I believe wholeheartedly that we all have a “cross” to bear—a difficult choice we have to make, a part of us we have to deny—for the sake of God’s Kingdom. It is true that not all of our crosses will require the same sacrifice: some may be asked to give up more than others. But I believe God rewards us when we make hard choices for His sake, and I believe those rewards are proportional to what we have to sacrifice.

*“His master replied, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!’” – MATTHEW 25:23*

6. It is also important to note that while homosexual practice is a sin according to the Bible, it is one of many sins, and the Bible makes it clear that we are all guilty of sin and in need of God’s grace. There is no exception to that:

*<sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus – ROMANS 3:23-24*

7. Finally, we need to realize that the so-called “Golden Rule”—given to us by Jesus—does not have exemptions or exceptions to it. Among other passages in Scripture (like Matthew 18’s teaching on church discipline), it should govern how we respond to any and all people:

***“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”** – MATTHEW 7:12*

How do we show grace and truth to a world in desperate need of both?

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# QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

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1. If someone were to ask you how we Christians can reconcile the idea that God is “love” with the concept of His “wrath,” how would you answer? Do you ever struggle with the idea of God’s wrath? How do you, personally, come to terms with it?
2. Read Romans 1:20-23. What examples do we see around us today of the world claiming to be “wise” but actually acting “foolish”?
3. In Romans 1:28-32, Paul makes it clear that though God has given us all a sense of right and wrong, people consciously choose the wrong and approve of those who do the same.
  - a. Is there anything that stands out to you about the list of sins that Paul talks about? Why does it stand out to you?
  - b. One of the sins that Paul mentions in this passage is that people are always “inventing” new ways to do “evil” (1:30). What examples do you see of that in our time?
4. Read Romans 1:26-27. What strikes you about how Paul describes same-sex behavior in this passage? Where might our modern secular society, which by-and-large has accepted same-sex relationships, find offense in what Paul says and how he says it?
5. React to the quote by Richard B. Hays on page 21 of this handout. What does this quote tell us about how we should approach the issue of same-sex attraction in the church?
6. What does it look like to show “grace” and “truth” to someone who is struggling with same-sex attraction?

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For further reading:

Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 1996).

Preston Sprinkle, *People to Be Loved: Why Homosexuality is Not Just an Issue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015).