

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS
Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch
Lesson 3 - Romans 1:18-2:11

Romans 1:18-32

The opening verse of this segment states the theme of the entire passage. Up to this point, Paul has been speaking in tones of affection and compliment. Now, he introduces a subject that must be unpleasant for him, but one which he feels needs to be addressed. He speaks of sin and its consequences.

In verses 16 and 17, Paul speaks of the gospel and how the power of the gospel leads a person to salvation. Now, in verses 18 through 32, he describes what happens when humanity refuses to acknowledge God. It is Paul's belief that all humanity should come to an awareness of God because of creation. God has revealed himself through his creative power. The order and beauty of creation reflect the very nature of God. But humanity is self-centered rather than God-centered, and this blindness has cast humanity into immorality and idolatry. It is no surprise that sin has its price, and the price of sin is death. In this commentary we will try to understand what Paul means by this.

In verse 18, Paul introduces the term "the wrath of God." We find this phrase many times in the Hebrew Scriptures. In Isaiah 30:27-28, the prophet describes God's judgment upon Assyria. The wrath of God is a powerful force which strikes the enemies of Israel. But Israel itself is also subject to this wrath because of disobedience. In Ezekiel 5:13, we have an example of how God's anger manifests itself against Jerusalem, because the people have not lived up to the covenant. It is interesting to note that in both of these passages the word "anger" is used. But Paul does not use the word "anger" with the wrath of God. He seems to understand "wrath" in a different way.

Paul does not doubt that sin begets punishment. The view which Paul takes is not that God delights in punishing, but rather that punishment is inherent in the very nature of evil. Notice that in verses 24, 26 and 28, we have a repetition of the words, "God gave them up." Paul uses this phrase in reference to the consequences of sin. God did not give them up in anger, but in sorrow and regret. This is the attitude of the father of the prodigal son. The father knows that love cannot be forced. But those who turn away from God will suffer the pain which is the necessary result of evil. Sin is its own punishment.

In 1 Thessalonians 1:10, Paul describes Jesus as the one “who rescues us from the wrath that is coming.” If Jesus is rescuing us from a wrath sent by God, then the implication is that Jesus and the Father are in opposition. But this cannot be. The Father is the one who sent Jesus to rescue us. The Father knows the destructive power of sin, and it is from this destructive power, this wrath, that Jesus saves us.

At the end of verse 18, Paul says that what the wicked do is “suppress the truth.” The truth which they suppress is that God is the beginning and fulfillment of all of creation. Sometimes the wicked worship idols, and in doing so they deny the truth that God is the creator. The wicked also resort to immorality. They deny the truth that humanity was made for God, and this relationship involves living according to a moral order. When this moral order is ignored, humanity suffers the consequences.

In verses 19 and 20, Paul expresses his belief that the pagans should have come to an awareness of the existence of God and of his qualities by observing creation. At first this seems to contradict what he says in 1 Corinthians 1:21 that, “The world did not know God through wisdom.” But Paul would add that if they did not come to know God, they should have.

This knowledge of God does not preclude the necessity of the Incarnation. Human reason can only go so far in its discovery of God. There is still the need for Jesus to come and speak of the love and forgiveness of God. Only through the person of Jesus is the fullness of revelation given to us.

In verse 21, Paul begins to list the sins of the pagans. This will continue up to verse 32. The root of this sinfulness is self-centeredness. Paul stresses the foolishness of this pagan activity. They worship human wisdom rather than divine wisdom. They worship mortal forms rather than worshipping the glory of the immortal God. This idolatry is the result of human pride. When humanity loses sight of God as the goal of its very existence, then the power of sin takes over.

The tone of verses 24 and 25 is one of deep sorrow, rather than anger. We have the first of the triple invocations that God “gave them up.” This is the result of free will. God created humanity in freedom and he will not force a response in love. When humanity turns its power of desire to that which is not in accord with its nature, then the only result is sin and pain. At the end of verse 25, Paul follows the traditional Jewish response of offering praise whenever the name of God is used.

Verses 26 and 27 show how deeply humanity has fallen from God’s original plan. The book of Genesis describes the original plan of God as he created them, male and female. But as humanity turns away from God all other relationships become distorted. At the time of Paul’s writing, homosexuality was rampant in Roman society.

The Roman historians leave evidence of the decadence of the times. Paul is not exaggerating. He is describing what, in fact, is happening.

Verses 28 through 32 are among the most sorrowful in Scripture. They describe the depravity that is reached when humanity refuses to acknowledge God. God's desire is to give freedom and life. But in the pagans' distorted thinking, they choose slavery and death.

In verse 32, Paul indicates that the pagans have a conscience. They know that what they are doing is wrong, and yet they choose to ignore God and the moral order. They know that the consequence of sin is spiritual death. But what is even more devastating is that they encourage others to pursue evil. It is not unusual for a person to give in to sin. But when the sin is acknowledged, a sense of contrition should come over the person. It is a sign of total slavery to sin, when a person seeks to enhance the alienation caused by evil.

Romans 2:1-11

With the beginning of Chapter 2, Paul makes a shift in his address. He had been speaking of how the pagans were suffering the consequences of their sins, because they refused to acknowledge God. We can almost see Paul's listeners nodding their heads in approval as Paul describes the punishment the pagans receive. As Paul speaks he is aware of the self-righteous attitude of some of the people. Now that Paul has the listeners emphatic in their condemnation of evil, he turns around and tells them that they are committing the same sins. They have no room to judge others.

In verse 1, Paul seems to address an imaginary person. He does not immediately identify the one or ones to whom he is speaking. All through the next sixteen verses, he continues the same tone. It is not until verse 17 that he will specify and say, "But if you call yourself a Jew..." In verses 1 through 11, Paul will intensify his stance until he reaches the climax in verse 11 where he says that "God shows no partiality."

Paul is proud of his Jewish background, for he knows that the Jews are God's chosen people. But he is also aware of how this chosen position was so often misunderstood by the Jews. They were chosen for ministry, not for privilege. They were chosen for service, not for superiority. In verse 2, Paul gives a quotation which he uses to reflect the attitude of the Jews. They state that they know that God punishes sin, and yet they do not recognize that they are in fact pronouncing their own sentence.

In verse 4, Paul reminds the Jews that they must not misinterpret the patience which God has shown them. They may not have received the same judgment meted out to the pagans, but this is not a sign that God is blind to their sins. What is happening is that God is giving them time to repent. If they ignore this generosity on the part of God, then they too will be subject to judgment.

In verse 5, Paul uses a phrase which would catch the attention of the Jewish listeners. He speaks of their “hard and impenitent hearts.” In Isaiah, in the Psalms, in Deuteronomy and many other places in the Hebrew Scriptures, we find references to the “hardness of their hearts.” Paul reminds the Jews that they should not repeat what happened in the past when they refused to listen to the word of God. He tells them that they are storing up wrath for themselves. They are aware that God’s just judgment will come, and so they must reform their lives and live in accord with God’s will.

Verse 6 is a very significant verse in Paul’s teaching. There are some commentators who only stress Paul’s message that salvation comes through faith in Christ. This is certainly true. But this teaching does not rule out the importance of works. The good works we perform are not the means by which we earn heaven. If we could work our own way into heaven then Jesus would not have had to die on the cross. But good works are the concrete signs which indicate that we have accepted the gift of faith. They are also our response to the love of God. In the letter of James 2:17, we find, “So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.” Paul would not contradict this. He would stress that it is unrealistic to think that faith can exist in a realm removed from the charity of this earthly life.

The gift which is prepared for those who seek what is good is eternal life. So often we think of “eternal life” in terms of the dimension of time, unending time. In our human imagination this is part of the future reality, but that is only one way of understanding this term. Eternity, by definition, means “no time,” and so there is somewhat of a contradiction in speaking of eternity as “unending time,” for time will no longer be a dimension. It is more accurate to speak of eternal life in terms of a deepening of our relationship with God. When we are called into existence we are already in relationship with God. When we accept the gift of faith, we enter a new form of relationship, and we are already living eternal life. This is not something that begins after we die. Even now we share divine life. This is the meaning of our baptism. This is the meaning of the Eucharist.

In verse 8, Paul repeats a thought he expressed in 1:18. He says that the wicked “obey not the truth.” In 1:18 he had said that the wicked “suppress the truth.” The truth he speaks of is the acknowledgement that God is the creator and the goal of our lives. Sin, of its very nature, is a refusal to accept this fact. The refusal may come from ignorance or from a hard heart. But in either case the result is that of anguish and distress.

Verses 9 and 10 create a reverse image of each other. In verse 9, Paul says that the wicked can expect to suffer for their sins. He reminds the Jews that they are not exempt from this judgment. Because of their status as the chosen people, they in fact will be the first to be judged. Verse 10 says that the good will receive glory and honor. Again the Jew will be blessed first, but the Greek will not be without reward. Whoever does good is given the promise of life, life with and in God.

In verse 11, Paul relates one of the major themes which distinguishes Judaism from Christianity. Paul says that God “shows no partiality.” In the Hebrew Scriptures, the predominant theme is what is called “Particularism.” This means that God loves only the Jewish people and no one else. We find this theme in Exodus and Deuteronomy in its strongest form. But there are also certain books which have “universalism” as their main theme. Books such as Jonah and Ruth try to convey the belief that all people are God’s people. In Jonah God has mercy on the Ninevites. In Ruth God accepts a Moabite woman as one from whom King David would descend, and eventually the Messiah.

In terms of blessing and judgment, it makes no difference whether a person is Jewish or Greek. God is the creator and Father of all people. The Jewish people have the advantage of God’s unique revelation and so they are called to live the truth. The Greeks on the other hand may not have this same revelation, but they, too, should come to know God through his creation. What Paul will go on to stress is that whether Jew or Greek, salvation comes through Jesus Christ. Our call as descendants of them is to respond to him in love.

Side Note: Vulgate

The Vulgate is St. Jerome’s Latin translation of the entire Bible from around 400 A.D. St. Jerome (345-420 A.D.) was the secretary to Pope St. Damasus I. This translation became the only source which could be used for subsequent translations of the Bible until 1943. In this year, Pope Pius XII wrote his encyclical “Divino Afflante Spiritu” in which he told scripture scholars that they should make their translations from the original Hebrew and Greek.

St. Jerome was also influential in encouraging Pope Damasus to decide once and for all how many books would be included in the New Testament. Prior to this decision, the New Testament at one time had seventeen books at another it had forty books. Pope Damasus decided on the twenty-seven we have today. The Bible, as we recognize it today, was in place by the time of the Council of Hippo in 393 A.D. It was not until the Council of Trent, cir. 1550, that the Catholic tradition closed the canon of the Bible. This meant that no books could be added to or taken from the Bible.