

How Bad It Can Get

Romans 1:18-32

January 30, 2011

I want to warn parents that this message should be rated PG. I am not suggesting you remove your children. Far from it, it is a message they need to hear. Recently the leadership of one of the most popular channels on television were caught wondering out loud if their most recent show actually breaks child pornography laws. We need to take a real look at how bad it can get, because the truth is we are pretty close.

Last week we saw as Paul introduced himself to the church in Rome in terms of the God who sent him and the gospel he preached. Paul's credentials and background were not important to him compared to the message he had to share and the one Who had given that message to him. We ended with a statement about the gospel that will be much of the driving force for the rest of the letter. So we can see how this morning's text grows out of it, let's look again at verses 16 and 17. *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith.'"*

Paul's point in this is that faith in the grace and mercy of God who has provided a way for our sin to be forgiven has always been the only way to **salvation**. The message of how God has made His grace available is the gospel, and so we find a righteousness that can only come from God in it. In order to support this statement

that righteousness is only found in the gospel and only gotten through belief Paul is going to take a long, hard look at the human condition and the sin that pervades the world. We will make our way through God's declaration of our condition without Him over the next couple of weeks.

The gospel is good news because it stands in opposition to the bad news. In order to help us understand the power of the gospel, Paul jumps into the bad news with both feet. *"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness."* (v.18)

Part of the problem of sinful humanity is that we minimize the problem of **sin**. Sin is not just an unfortunate consequence of the world in which we live, it is responsible for the perversion of creation. Sin, godlessness and wickedness, is the reason we have pain and suffering. It is the reason we have such a hard time with our relationships. It is the reason we have sickness. It is the reason we fight each other and disagree. Sin is the reason we need police and armies. It was sin that drove that man last week to take his girlfriend and two young children hostage and engage the police and prosecutor's office in an hours long standoff. It is sin that led to two officers and a police dog bring wounded. Sin is willful disobedience against God's will. It is choosing to do our thing instead of God's. It is rebellion against Him.

We tell ourselves we slip or we fall. We use pretty euphemisms to disguise and try to reduce the fact that our sinful natures hate God's holiness and fight against

Him. Yet we only mask our understanding of sin. Our pretending cannot remove the damage we have done. It only compounds our sin as Paul reminds us that part of being godless and wicked is to suppress the truth. Sin, all sin, rightfully deserves the full **wrath** of God.

This is true the world over. It is not only the people who have received a direct and specific revelation from God who stand guilty before Him. Paul starts his declaration of our sinfulness with one of the groups people often raise when they hear about the gospel. The question comes, “What of those who have never heard?” Paul makes it clear that there are none who stand innocent before God. Not everyone knows the ten commandments, but we are all, every human, guilty of sin because we have all chosen to do what we knew was wrong.

There are things we ought to know about God by simply looking at the world around us. The Psalmist was able to look at the world and human history and declare, “*The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’*” (Psalm 14:1) Paul show us why this is true in verse 20: “*For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.*” God may be invisible, but His power and the fact that He exists are not. It has been obvious from the very beginning that God made the world, that we are His and not our own, and that we have a holy and righteous God with which to deal. The history of human religion is the result of our attempts to deal with the guilt of our sin and the knowledge that there is one Who stands in judgement

over us. We go through great lengths to try to appease His wrath, even as we misidentify Him.

Paul places the blame for our not knowing God as we ought in the fact that we, and the generations before us, have neither glorified Him nor given thanks to Him. We do not give God His proper place, and so our thinking becomes futile and our hearts are darkened as we shut out His light. There are plenty of examples of this. Paul looked at the world around him and he saw people making statues out of metal, stone and wood. Sometimes these statues would be made to look like humans. Other times they would look like bulls or another animal. Then the people who made the statues would bow before them and worship them as if they were gods. These people claimed to be wise and to understand the world, and yet they worshiped the work of their own hands.

In our world it really isn’t any different, it’s just a little more subtle. Our society operates with the understanding that there is nothing greater than the human intellect and our capacity to figure things out. We are called by God to think and reason. He made us to study the world in which we live and to understand it. As the church founded the first colleges and universities and as theologians sought to understand the world it was so that we might better glorify God by better understanding His handiwork. It went off the rails when people started to say that the fact that we could understand the world and uncover the laws that govern the universe means that God does not exist. It is amazing how much we still don’t know, and yet we speak about God as if we knew everything. We have

declared that He doesn't exist because we think we don't need Him to explain our lives and world anymore. We have already seen what the Psalmist and Paul have to say about that.

Even when we do acknowledge that God exists, we tend to remake Him in our image. Everybody outside the church that believes in God, and many people that attend services every week, believe what they want about God regardless of what the scriptures say about Him. We seek to return to the days of the ancient Greeks when the gods were just like us only stronger, bigger, and more passionate. Instead of being content being made in God's image and learning how to be like Him, we seek out things that help us believe His is more like us. We want Him to follow our definition of love. We hold Him to our moral standard and judge Him deficient when we learn He has done something we do not understand. Whether studying God's word, or looking at the realities and pain of life, the modern inclination is to declare that God has done, and is doing, some horrible things that we would be too good to do. Many who believe this way have decided that they cannot worship God because of it. All who think this way have stood in judgement over God and declared Him a sinner.

No-one has the right to do this. God is God. We are not. He made us. We did not make ourselves, and we most certainly did not make Him. Who are we with our limited understanding and utter lack of knowledge to stand in judgement over Him? We should glorify Him and give Him thanks for choosing to give us life and for whatever good we have. We are all without **excuse**.

What does God do with people in this position? Paul tells us His judgement on them. *"Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts . . ."* (v.24) What a horrible condition in which to be. To be given over by God to the sinful desires that keep us from Him. The **worst** thing that can happen is for God to give a sinner what he wants. To have a heart that is so hardened by sin and a mind that is so perverted and depraved that we can happily go on in our sin and rebellion against God is a fearful thing. Yet this is what happens when we trade God's truth for lies and we worship the world, ourselves, or our image of God rather than God as He has revealed Himself to us.

It is the nature of sin to take the **good** things God has made and twist and pervert them for evil and sinful uses. This is also true of the things that bring us the greatest pleasure. Sex is meant to bind a husband and wife together in a physical unity that mirrors the spiritual unity of the marriage bond. It is a physical reflection of the emotional and spiritual intimacy to which the couple is called and which exists within God Himself. Thus sexual union is one of the most beautiful, and pleasurable, gifts God has given us, and one of the gifts with the most potential to be misused. Paul has mentioned idolatry a couple of times already. Now he turned to the extreme example of sexual sin.

Because God gives those who do not acknowledge Him over to the sinful desires of their hearts, things go from bad to worse. As an example of this, Paul pointed to the practice of homosexual activity and the homosexual desires that fuel it. Make no mistake—God is very clear that homosexual behavior is a sin. Like

adultery it is a perversion of the gift of sex. It is not just less than God's ideal, as some would say. It is outright rebellion against the way God created us to relate with one another, and thus it is rebellion against God Himself. When we leave God and no longer acknowledge Him, anything can happen. Women can "exchange natural relations for unnatural ones." Men can treat one another and lust after one another in the ways in which they are meant to treat and desire their wives. There are those in the church today who want us to see homosexuality as normal and even a gift from God. This position is in direct opposition to every scriptural text that addresses it. Our society demands that we accept homosexuality as normal and that no judgements be made regarding it. There is even a perception that speaking against homosexual activity is illegal, and some are pushing to make it so.

Is homosexuality as bad as it can get? No. It is no greater than any other sin. It is evidence that the society that accepts it and other sins is well on its way to experiencing the wrath of God. Paul uses homosexual desire and behavior as an example, but he went on to list many other sins beside. A world that is full of sin and given over to the sinful desires of its darkened hearts is also ". . . *filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.*" (vv.29-31) You may not give in to homosexual urges, but it is a safe bet that you have been envious, taken delight in speaking ill

about someone else (even under the cover of asking for prayer), have disobeyed your parents, or been faithless, arrogant or boastful. When we do not keep the knowledge of **God**, He gives us over to our depraved minds, and we are helpless before them.

Paul's final statement on all this sin reveals God's judgement on all of it. "*Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.*" (v.32) All these things are under God's righteous judgement and carry the penalty of death. It is as bad as it can get when people not only do these things, but approve others who do them. When a society celebrates the things God declares to be sin it has gotten as bad as it can get.

Thanks be to God this is the beginning of Paul's argument, not the end. He has shown us how bad it can get because he wants us to understand the fulness of the statement he made about the gospel. It is the power of God unto salvation. The **gospel** is God's solution to the depravity and perversion of our sin and the guilt it lays on us. Only the gospel can rescue us from God's righteous decree against us. We do not have to shake in fear that God will find out what we are doing (as if He does not already know). Through the gospel God's righteousness can be imparted to us. Jesus came to save us from the power of sin and the death that it brings. Paul is going to go on describing how bad things can get. Still, he does it to show how great God is and to help us see clearly what Jesus has done for those who believe in Him!