

Romans 1:18-2:16

Introduction

In this text Paul demonstrates that the Gentile world rejected any knowledge of God they could have had and darkened their understanding and did not honor give thanks to God. They became as unfaithful toward God and each other as God is faithful toward the world. God's wrath was seen in his handing them over to their selfish desires with the intent that they would turn to Him.

Paul exposes the flawed thinking of the Gentile moralist who proudly saw him/herself as a justified critic of the rest of the Gentile world. He also exposes the flawed thinking of the Jew who found their assurance before God in being God's covenant people and in possessing Torah. This demonstrates the truth that God is impartial.

The Sinful Gentile World: 1:18-32

Before exploring how God's covenant-keeping faithfulness brings deliverance, Paul first describes God's historical expression of wrath on the Gentile world. This text is very similar to other Jewish descriptions of the sinful pagan world as well as that of Gentile moralists of Paul's day.

When the text talks about the wrath of God being revealed, Paul does not have in mind natural disaster and other such things. As will be seen later, His wrath is an expression of his passionate love for his creation. One way suggested for an understanding of the revealing of God's wrath is that the gospel event that was just mentioned by Paul is not only a revelation of God's righteousness but also God's wrath. God demonstrated his wrath toward the destructive power of sin in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In verses 24, 26, and 28 God's wrath will be defined in the phrase, "God gave them up."

The word "wickedness" (v. 18) comes from the same root word for righteousness and should more correctly be translated "injustice." It is the antithesis of God's justice/faithfulness. People became as unfaithful as God is faithful.

Two main reasons are given for God's wrath. One (v. 19), knowledge of God was evident to the Gentile through creation. That creation reveals something about the nature of God was not some unexpected serendipity. The revealing of God through creation was part of God's plan (Psalm 19). This reminds us what can be known of God has to be revealed by Him. "Observation of created life is sufficient to show that creation does not provide the key to its own existence (Dunn, pg. 57). The world certainly should have seen God's power and His loving care for His creation. Having such an understanding of God should have led to people living faithful lives with God and each other. They should have known to worship God and to give Him thanks.

This view of creation applies more to the ancient world than the modern world of enlightenment, evolution, and atheism. Everyone in the ancient world believed in an active spiritual world and believed in God or gods who had created the universe. Even though believing in gods, they suppressed the truths they should have seen in creation concerning the reality of the one true God and instead, pursued their own selfish

purposes.

Two (v. 21), though knowing God they neither honored God nor gave thanks. These verses describe how refusing to see and even actively hiding the truth about God leads to the destruction of society. People became less than human. They did not respond appropriately with worship and faithful living. Instead, they gave that honor to images of humans and creatures in creation (1:23). Because they suppressed the truth about God, they did not really know Him and therefore did not know how to appropriately respond to Him. The idea of honoring God will come up again when Paul addresses the Jew.

The first step on the path of sin is the inability to think straight, to have one's mind darkened or debased (1:21, 28). Worshipping an idol is worshipping a lie. It is the falsifying of reality. Such false thinking brings death (8:6).” God's battle to overcome the power of sin is a battle over the hearts and minds of humanity. This battle cannot be overcome by the will of humankind nor can it be overcome by the teaching of law. It is accomplished only through the power of God's Spirit. As will be seen later in the letter, life and peace are found in setting one's mind on the Spirit (8:7). The work of the Spirit is the reshaping of people's minds. So, Paul will exhort them to no longer be conformed to the world, but to allow God to transform their minds so that they can understand how to respond appropriately to God (12:2).

The result of a darkened or depraved mind was an increasing scope of destruction. It began with exchanging the glory of God for idols, (worshiping things that resemble God's creation). This downward spiral moves from the destruction of one's personal life (vv. 21–23) to the intrapersonal (vv. 24–27) to the societal (vv. 28–32). This is the beginning of Paul's goal of showing that everyone, Jew and Gentile, are held captive to the oppressive power of sin.

God's wrathful response to the Gentile world is that He “gave them up” (vv. 24, 26, 28). This was a deliberate response of God's. God gave them what they wanted, freedom to run after their own selfish passions to their own destruction. This would have been surprising to Gentiles in particular because they saw their gods as angry avengers of their honor. In a honor/shame society, which is how the Eastern world viewed life, it was important not to allow a wrong to go unpunished. Instead of responding, as they believed their gods responded, God let them go the direction they desired. This was a purposeful choice on God's part. The reality of God's wrath was experienced through the destructive things the Gentile world did to themselves and to each other. Chapter 2 will show that giving them up, rather than destroying them, not only involved letting them, in a sense, destroy themselves, it also portrayed the character of God as One who is kind and patient and has the desire that they repent. This was God's way of dealing with sin prior to the cross. As stated in 2:5, 6,16 there is another day coming (final judgment) when God will judge all according to what they have done and judge the secret thoughts of all.

Paul addressed a judgmental Gentile moral critic: 2:1-11

In these, and in the following verses that are directed toward the Jew, Paul used a popular rhetoric device (diatribe) to show when it comes to sin, there is no separation between people. This style of speech addresses an imaginary debate opponent in order to respond to supposed objections. It is impossible to know for sure who Paul's

imaginary opponent is in these verses. Some scholars believe a Jew is the conversation partner throughout chapter 2. Others believe it is a Gentile moralist in these verses and then Paul transitions into a discussion with a Jew in verse 17. The following comments will follow the view that it is a Gentile moralist in these verses. Which one Paul is talking to here does not change the main point of the message and certainly does not change where Paul is taking this whole conversation and that is to show that all helplessly fall are under the power of sin and to show God's dealing with all people is impartial. By hearing this imaginary conversation, Paul hoped the Roman church would come to the same understanding and draw the conclusion there is no place for a judgmental attitude toward one another.

There were moralists in the Gentile world that wrote very similar condemnations against those Paul addressed in the previous section. They believed their philosophy made them different. Paul showed that having an enlightened philosophy does not separate the moralist from the rest of the Gentiles because they are guilty of the same things.

Although the moralist may have agreed that there was a god that was patient and kind, they never would have come to the conclusion that God's patience was needed for them. They never would have thought they needed to repent. From Paul's perspective, without repentance, they stood in the same path toward the final judgment ("God's day of wrath") as those they condemned. God's judgment is described as righteous, which is the same word that carries the idea of relationship and covenant faithfulness as presented throughout this study. God's judgment is His faithful action designed to keep His promise of making the world right again.

Whatever one does with verses 6-11, it cannot be speaking of a works righteousness that merits eternal life. Such a view would be against everything else Paul says in this letter. The purpose of this text is not a dogma about works vs. faith. This is a broad perspective of things, a perspective most all would have agree with and is a part of Paul's argument that will eventually lead to the conclusion God treats everyone with impartiality. A Gentile or Jew who seeks to do good works receives blessings. A Gentile or Jew who seeks selfish gain receives wrath.

Partiality in having Torah?: 2:12-16

This section continues the point that God is impartial. "Law" here is speaking of Torah, one of the prominent distinctions between Jew and Gentile. Jews believed they had a privileged relationship with God that could not be threatened because of their election and possessing Torah. Paul's point here is this is a false assumption. Just having or hearing the law does no good. Only those who do the law will be accepted. Of course, no one can do the law and therefore cannot be accepted on that basis. Paul, believing that all have sinned, states that regardless as to whether one sins without Torah (Gentiles) or sins with Torah (Jews), all stand condemned.

Jews took comfort and pride in not only having the law but in their doing of the law. Some Gentiles were highly spoken of by the Jews because of their lives (Acts 10:22) and there were acknowledgements (2 Esdras 3:36) that some individual Gentiles kept the commandments. Paul is not saying any Gentiles always keep the law but that there are Gentiles who sometimes instinctively ("written on their hearts") live as the law instructs even though they have no knowledge of Torah. Some Gentiles also have a

moral conscience that is outside the knowledge of Torah. Just as it should with the Jews, their conscience produces conflicts within them leading to either giving excuses for their behavior or condemning their behavior. The gospel speaks of a day when God through the One who was appointed to the position of power and authority will judge the secrets of thoughts of all, Jew and Gentile. Paul's point in this section is to undercut the assumption that the law is only known and kept by Jews and that they are assured a favorable verdict at the final judgment.

To Sum It Up

"Division" is a word that can be used to describe the world. Whether it is religious, economic, ethnic, gender, etc. the world is anything but harmonious. Divisions in the world produce animosity, judgmental attitudes, and violence. This attitude is even found among God's people and existed in the church at Rome. By showing that everyone is under the power of sin and in need of the gospel, Paul is moving toward the goal of removing the divisions that humankind has created.

The Gentile world is without excuse. They could have known enough of God to worship Him and to be thankful. Instead, they exchange the truth for a lie, which led to wrong-headed thinking about life, which led to worship idols, which is a falsifying of reality. The result was a self-destructive life that led to the breakdown of society in general, as they acted with injustice (with unfaithfulness) toward themselves and others. What they deserve is the consequence of sin, death. God's wrath is seen in His letting them go their chosen path so that they might turn toward Him.

Gentile moralists who condemned others are really no better. They should have understood the patience of God and that should have led them to repent. Paul makes the point that the moralist darkened his/her minds, just as had the rest of the world, so they could not see the reality about God and themselves. It is not uncommon for those who have a condemning attitude to be self-deceived.

Having the law is not a point of distinction or when it comes to sin and judgment. The bottom line is that God is impartial. God will treat Jew with Torah and Gentile without Torah (moralist or not) with the same faithful, covenant justice.

Romans
1:18-2:16

1. What do you see as being at the very core of how the world turned away from God?
2. What was its impact on the world?
3. What is surprising about the way God has historically responded to the wickedness of the Gentiles?
4. According to 2:1-11, what is often true of people who are very judgmental? Why do you think that is true?
5. How might 2:12-16 apply to religious people today?