

# CONCERNING THE WAY

August 10, 2010

## LESSON 108: PAUL'S LETTER TO THE ROMANS



### What is wrong with people?

In the remainder of Romans chapter 1 Paul discusses the depravity of mankind. We'll start with verse 18, but first let's look at a verse in the Old Testament:

**(Ecclesiastes 7:29) This alone have I discovered: God made humankind upright, but they have sought many evil schemes.**

**(Ecclesiastes 7:20) For there is not one truly righteous person on the earth who continually does good and never sins.**

This is the foundation for what Paul will say in these verses.

In the church today there are two main views of the fall of mankind. One view is called "Total Depravity" – no one by themselves will come to God. People don't want God and will reject the truth. The other view says that the fall was real, but people have a natural choice or ability to come to God. These two views are generally included in what is called Calvinism and Arminianism, but those are just labels.

Total depravity has been the dominant view of protestant churches since the reformation, while the Arminian view is relatively new and held by some holiness churches. I grew up in "holiness" denominations that held to the view that we have the ability to come to Christ on our own, but as I grew older and started studying the scriptures for myself I was forced to change my views to what the Bible actually taught – the total depravity of mankind. I learned that people certainly do have a choice. But, without the intervention of God, people will never innately choose God or the gospel. That's why God is angry! That's why those of us who have accepted Christ are a walking miracle.

If God did not call me, I would still be lost and under the wrath of God. Without His touch, I would never have desired to follow God. This is called Biblical Anthropology. Mankind is lost and cut off from God.

In these verses Paul will tell us what our state is by nature. Don't fool yourself by thinking that he is only talking about the unsaved. **This is all of us apart from the grace of God!** The more you discover what a sinner you are, the more you will realize the fact of God's grace. **And the more you despair of mankind and of yourself, the easier it is to rest in Christ and in His work of salvation for you.**

**The FACT of God's wrath.**

**Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth by their unrighteousness,**

People don't like to hear it and most pastors don't teach it in churches any more but it is a fact: God is

furious (that's what wrath means). His fury is revealed from heaven against sin. However, preachers and teachers have soft-pedalled sin, until the fear Of God is vanishing away.

God's wrath is directed against all the godlessness (*asebeian*, "lack of proper reverence for God") and wickedness (*adikian*, "unrighteousness") of men, not against the men as such. Godlessness has to do with sin against the being of God; unrighteousness has to do with morality and our relation to each other. The unrighteous live as though God's will has not been revealed. The ungodly live as if there is no God, they have no regard for Him at all.

God hates sin and judges it, but loves sinners and desires their salvation. God is patient and longsuffering toward us. However, God is not tolerant. He does not tolerate sin, He doesn't "wink at it", and He does not "grade on a curve". He has a holy aversion to all that is evil. **His wrath against sin is as much a part of His nature as His love and mercy.** This is hard for many to accept. He loves the world and has given everything to save it, but, like it or not, He must judge sin, or He would guilty of sin Himself, and that is not possible.

"suppress the truth" means holding down the truth. Ungodly people have to be continually suppressing the truth, even if it means hurting someone else, to protect themselves or do things their way.

**Romans 1:19** because what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

This is not speaking of the gospel, but of general revelation, that is the obvious evidence of creation and other external evidences that God exists. Man is condemned because truth was given to him (vv. 19-20) and because he by his actions rejected it (vv. 21-32). **Everyone has enough knowledge of God to make them responsible to Him.**

**(Romans 1:20)** For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, because they are understood through what has been made. So people are without excuse.

Also see Psalm 19:1. One thing I know, is that every lost person who stands before God at the Great White Throne Judgment will have to admit that they did not want anything to do with God. There will be none who will say, "Oh but if you would have just chosen me, or shown yourself more to me, or sent me the gospel, I would have come to you. The phrase "without excuse" is literally "without a defense". **NO ONE will have a defense for being ungodly and unrighteous.**

People are without excuse. There is plenty of clear evidence all around us of the existence of God. And not only of His existence, but about who God is — His eternal power and divine nature. **Nature and the world we live in give us clues that God is a real person, transcendent above His creation and not part of it.**

When you look at a tree, you don't literally see God, but you see invisible things about God. You see something large that sprouted and grew from a tiny seed — this is an everyday miracle that we take for granted, but it shows us clearly some things about who the Creator God is. He is powerful, obviously, but He also is a master designer, he cares about His creation (the interactivity between trees and animals and birds), and has an appreciation for beauty. Those are just a few things we learn about God from looking at a tree. You can see God working in that tree. And His eternal power sustains all of creation continually.

But an unbeliever thinks that all the beautiful intricate complexity of a tree just happens by accident – not a miracle. They don't see God in it at all. They think that the tree developed by chance over billions of years from some slime or something. God is going to speak to the atheistic biologist at the Judgment and ask, "What did you say about my trees?"

Then there are those who worship trees because they think they are part of God. But that's a whole different corruption of the truth. **God is the Creator, not part of the creation – He is above it.**

*"Humanity today prefers Hollywood's "sound-pictures" to seeing the "things" of the glorious God in the heavens,—beholding His works, and hearing their speech. How long since you have gone out and gazed at moon and stars, made by the blessed God, travelling in such quiet glory, beauty, power, and order? Men know, if they care to know, that an infinite Majesty made and controls this." William Newell*

Paul is saying if people would just stop suppressing the truth that is revealed in nature, they would come to understand and worship God. They continue to ignore the plain evidence and come up with false theories that exclude God. That is suppressing the truth, and that is why they are without excuse. And this doesn't say anything about the gospel yet. **An unbeliever can't even get past this point, these things that are clearly evident, much less believe in the Messiah.**

Paul also speaks of this in 1 Corinthians:

**(1 Corinthians 2:14) The unbeliever does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him. And he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.**

"Unbeliever" is translated "natural" man in some versions. This is a man who is only operating within his own soul. This kind of person is incapable of understanding the things of God. You could preach to a person like this for 100 years, and it wouldn't make any sense to them. They will always consider it stupid. Until the Holy Spirit draws them, no one can get it. And all of us were in that place. All of us were "natural". But God chose us, the Holy Spirit opened our hearts to the gospel, and we were then able to receive spiritual truth. Back to Romans:

**Romans 1:21-23 For although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God or give him thanks, but they became futile in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened. (22) Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools (23) and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for an image resembling mortal human beings or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.**

Most commentators believe Paul is speaking historically here – it is a description of what happened early on after the creation and fall. Adam and Eve knew God and taught their children to know Him, but gradually their descendants abandoned this knowledge and turned away from the truth about God. Progressively mankind did not honor Him as God or give thanks. But it is still true today, and so is just as relevant.

*"Every human being knows he ought to give his being over to his Creator's worship and glory, and ought to be continually thankful for life itself, and for its blessings; but men refused both worship and gratitude: they became godless and thankless. But they could not free themselves thus easily from conscience and terrors: so came on idolatry... Think of a whole race of created beings knowing, but refusing to recognize, their Creator! of their eating from His hand daily, but refusing even one thanksgiving! Yet such ungodly ones, such unthankful ones, are all about you, now." William Newell*

“Become futile in their thoughts” basically means that knowledge that people passed to one another became useless. People try to find God in their own minds and own reasoning. People come to conclusions from their own minds instead of objective truth, and they just “dialogue” with each other. This dialogue has become more and more useless and empty speculation, and never comes to any lasting conclusion. This is the way the world is today, isn’t it? “Senseless” means stupid, moronic. “Hearts” is speaking of the emotions. Their minds weren’t darkened, but their moronic emotions were darkened. This is an emotional generation, isn’t it?. People want emotional experiences. **How they “feel” is what’s important, not what the objective Word of God says.**

I don’t know about you, but I don’t want my doctor to diagnose me with his feelings, or his emotions. I don’t want my pilot to fly the plane on his emotions when I’m travelling by air. And I don’t want to run my faith by emotions. People don’t want to come to church to think any more, they just want to feel.

And though they claimed to be wise, they became fools – they became morons! This doesn’t just mean lacking intelligence, but they are incapable of understanding who God is. Instead of worshipping the immortal Creator, they would rather worship mortal corruptible, decaying human beings or animals. **Man’s refusal to acknowledge and glorify God leads to a downward path: first, worthless thinking; next, moral insensitivity; and then, religious stupidity** (seen in idol-worship).

So although everyone knows there is a creator God because of the clear evidence in nature, they either try to bring Him down to the level of His creation or deny Him altogether.

*“How men are rushing back to the old pagan pit out of which God’s Word and His gospel would have delivered them! They suck up sin; they welter in wickedness; they profess to be wise! They sit at the feet of “professors” whose breath is spiritual cyanide. They idolize the hog-sty doctrines of a rotten Freud and count themselves “wise”! They say, “God is not a person; men evolved from monkeys; morals are mere old habits; self-enjoyment, self-expression, indulgence of all desires—this,” they say, “is the path of wisdom.”* Newell

We might think of idol worship as being something that only happened in ancient times, but it is still practiced in a large part of the world. Hinduism is the major religion that this verse is speaking of today. They worship all sorts of animals as gods. The American Indian religions are like this, too. They worship animals as gods. One of the first things missionaries did when they went to the Indians in the northwest is take down their totem poles – they knew they were worshipped as gods, how evil they were. Now the Indians cry and moan that the white man took their totem poles! Many of them are moving back to paganism, exactly what verse 23 is speaking of.

But this isn’t just speaking of literal idols. People don’t like to believe there’s a God, and when they’re repeatedly told in their education that they don’t need a god, those who we should be teaching about God instead become futile in their thoughts and their hearts are darkened – they become pagans. They may not worship idols made to look like humans or animals, but they worship other things, like a person, or a job, or money, or things. But **they always deny the rightful place of God over His creation.** The result is the same as traditional idol-worshippers, and the judgment is the same.

*“Those who deny the God of creation are fools (Psalm 14:1) and “without a defense” Yet they come to such a foolish decision in the foolish belief that they are scientific in trying to explain the infinitely complex, majestic, beautiful creation without a Creator. The ancient pagans did this, with immeasurably tragic results in the history of the human race. Modern evangelicals, compromising with evolutionism and increasingly flirting with New Age pantheism, feminism and occultism, are in serious*

*danger of starting down that same slippery slope.” Henry Morris*

**Romans 1:24** Therefore God gave them over in the desires of their hearts to impurity, to dishonor their bodies among themselves.

The “desires (or lust in some translations) of their hearts” is deeper than the “lust of the flesh”. Flesh has natural desires, which can be yielded to or not. But the lust of the heart will last when the flesh is gone, on into eternity for those who refuse to repent and turn to Christ.

History shows this “giving over”. Mankind, left on their own, may seem to make progress, and we certainly are taught that in our history books, but without fail every civilization has degenerated into greater and greater depravity. The so-called “Golden Age” of Greece and Rome that we are so fascinated with today are just two examples.

Three times in the next few verse Paul is going to use the phrase, “God gave them over”. It means God just says, “OK, if that’s what you want, that’s what you’re going to get. I’ll let you do what you want to do.” That is not freedom, but being enslaved to sin, to their own desires. People think they are free, but they are not.

You can certainly see the evidence of this in today’s society, where sexual expression is pretty much anything goes. “Dishonoring your body” is using sex apart from God’s intent, which is between a man and a woman in marriage. That’s the intent of the phrase in Greek.

People hate the twinge of guilt they feel when they first do something they know is wrong, and eventually they lose those feelings of guilt and their conscience becomes seared. They abandon themselves to the consequences of their sin. **They hate God and anyone who reminds them that what they’re doing is wrong.** That’s why you see such hatred and contempt coming from many homosexuals and evolutionary scientists towards Christians. They can’t stand being reminded that they are rebelling against God.

In order to suppress the witness of the ordered structure of the universe and the innate testimony of the conscience, fallen people had to develop a reasoning process that conjured up human solutions that the Bible calls “futile speculations”. **God must consider many of the explanations given to students in university classrooms around the world today as “futile speculations.” It is described by God as futile because the whole structure of man-made philosophy is devoid of divine truth, and therefore fundamentally invalid.** Solomon tells us where wisdom and understanding come from:

**Proverbs 9:10** The beginning of wisdom is to fear the LORD, and acknowledging the Holy One is understanding.

**Without God, education becomes a futile search for the truth that ends in the garbage dump of human reasoning.**

See what Paul says to the Ephesians:

**Ephesians 2:1-3** And although you were dead in your transgressions and sins, (2) in which you formerly lived according to this world's present path, according to the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the ruler of the spirit that is now energizing the sons of disobedience, (3) among whom all of us also formerly lived out our lives in the cravings

**of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath even as the rest...**

Seeking knowledge without God is just indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, as Paul says in verse 3.

All of us were dead to God until He called us and we accepted Christ. Verse 2 says that this present world's path is being set by Satan (the ruler of kingdom of the air), and he is also behind the impersonal spirit that drives those who are in rebellion against God.

Notice the end of verse 3. We were all, by nature, children of wrath. By the way, there are three views of our sin nature:

1. God declares us to be guilty of sin, because of Adam's sin
2. Adam passed on to us, by his genetics, the tendency to sin
3. We are sinners because of our environment – we learn to sin

Actually, I think there's truth in all three of those views. Paul focuses on the first view in Ephesians 5, but all three have scriptural support. OK, let's get back to Romans:

**Romans 1:25 They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshiped and served the creation rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.**

The result of ungodliness and unrighteousness is always idolatry. Worshipping the creation is the most popular form of religion in the world today. There is no messing around here, it is a lie.

Any other religion is a lie. People hate the fact that Christianity is exclusive. But no other religion has the truth of God. The world and many liberal Christians would like to think that all religions are equal, that they are all legitimate ways to God. **But which god are you worshipping?** One of your own desire, your own making, or the one true God who is revealed to us in nature and in the Bible? The beliefs of the different religions are not compatible with each other, and trying to make them compatible makes them all worthless.

**Romans 1:26-27 For this reason God gave them over to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged the natural sexual relations for unnatural ones, (27) and likewise the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed in their passions for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.**

These are not normal and natural desires of the body. Somehow, somehow, ungodliness and unrighteousness always lead to sexual impurity, whether heterosexual or homosexual. But this passage is not speaking of heterosexuality or simple adultery. **The descent into evolutionary paganism is always soon followed by gross immorality, specifically including sexual perversion.** There are many examples in history including ancient Sodom and Greece, where it became so widespread that it was considered normal. **Humans cannot deny God's existence and influence in their lives and avoid their own lust.**

What is "dishonorable passions"? Paul goes on to explain. This is lesbianism and homosexuality, plain and simple. You can't possibly make it anything else; Paul is speaking of sexual relations here.

God only approves of monogamous, heterosexual relationships in marriage. There are natural sexual relations between men and women, and sexual relations between men and other men are not natural! You can deny it until you're blue in the face, but it doesn't change the facts of what God says. The sin being described here is very clear, and it is judged and will be judged by God.

"Received in themselves the due penalty for their error" – some would say this is speaking of sexual diseases like AIDS and other venereal diseases that have occurred throughout history here, and that may be what is being spoken of. There is a consequence for rebellion against God. There are always consequences for any sin, and they all ultimately lead to death.

*"The words translated women and men in these verses are the sexual words "females" and "males." Contemporary homosexuals insist that these verses mean that it is perverse for a heterosexual male or female to engage in homosexual relations but it is not perverse for a homosexual male or female to do so since homosexuality is such a person's natural preference. This is strained exegesis unsupported by the Bible. The only natural sexual relationship the Bible recognizes is a heterosexual one (Gen. 2:21-24; Matt. 19:4-6) within marriage. All homosexual relations constitute sexual perversion and are subject to God's judgment." John Walvoord*

*"What a fearful account is here! A lost race plunging ever deeper, by their own desire! Left in shameful, horrid bondage, unashamed,—not only immoral, but unmoral, hideous. Missionaries abroad can tell you of what they find; as can the Christian workers in our great cities. But you would be unprepared to believe what exists, in the private lives of many, even in country districts through Christendom. And if God has "made you to differ," thank Him only! It will not do to hold up your hands in self-righteous dismay, and say, These verses do not in any particular describe me. For God will show you and me that this is exactly the race as we were born into it, and out of which the only rescue is being born again. All these things pertain to lost, fallen man." Newell*

**Romans 1:28** And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what should not be done.

Given over to do what? To live lives, think thoughts, be the kind of creatures, that do not belong, are not suitable in the universe of the Creator God; and above all not suitable to be human, who was created in God's image.

Again, Paul says that, if you want to fulfill your depraved desires, God will turn you over to it so that you can't tell that it's wrong any more. It warps their mind. They begin to believe that what they are doing is not so bad; in fact, it's their chosen lifestyle, and God (and Christians) ought to leave them alone.

The word "depraved" means "unapproving" or "undiscerning". God will let you do what you want, and you will be enslaved by it, so that you just get deeper and deeper into it and can't even tell what is right or wrong any more. People with minds like this join activist homosexual groups and march in gay pride parades. They accuse moral people of being intolerant and using hate speech. **Condemning homosexuality and illicit heterosexuality is not hate speech! It is actually love speech.** People that speak out against these things believe that judgment is waiting for adulterers and homosexuals. They don't want to let their friends and family go to hell without a fight.

**Romans 1:29-31** They are filled with every kind of unrighteousness, wickedness, covetousness, malice. They are rife with envy, murder, strife, deceit, hostility. They are gossips, (30) slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, contrivers of all

**sorts of evil, disobedient to parents, (31) senseless, covenant-breakers, heartless, ruthless.**

Some of these things are self-evident in meaning. But we'll define some of them you may not be familiar with:

**Covetousness** is literally, the "itch for more." It is defined as "(a) Claiming more than one's due, greedy, grasping; (b) making gain from others' losses; (c) the act of over-reaching by selfish tricks. To take advantage of another's simpleness, to over-reach, defraud."

**Malice** is "a desire to injure"

**Strife** is literally, beating down in wrangling and contention.

**Deceit** in the Greek means "a bait for fish", so, to catch with a bait, to entice by deceiving

**Slanderers** – speaking falsehoods about someone

**Haters of God** – to show hate as well as to feel hate against God

**Insolent** – taking pleasure in insulting others

**Arrogant** – being full of haughty pride toward others

**Boastful** – bragging about yourself - the very opposite of Jesus, who is meek and lowly

**Contrivers of evil** – people who invent new ways to do evil

**Disobedient to parents** – literally, not able to be persuaded by parents, a rejection of parental control. This has increased in our culture over time (as God said it would in 2 Timothy 3:1,2), until now it is almost accepted that children are just that way. It brings a curse upon whole families, even whole communities. Obedience to parents brings a promise of blessing (Ephesians 6:2,3)

**Senseless** – without moral or spiritual understanding – no understanding or discernment of divine things

**Covenant-breakers** – faithless, bound by no promise. The Greek denotes that there is not even intent to carry out the promise except for selfish reasons

**Heartless** – without natural affection – no natural affection for family

**Ruthless** – without mercy, think of man's inhumanity to man

It's amazing that this 1<sup>st</sup> century list of evil is still like reading the newspapers today. The world hasn't changed. Paul is speaking in this whole section of all people in the world, and you and me without the power of the cross of Christ in our lives. What an indictment against humanity this is!

Most people are not as fully evil as they can be – most do not do all of these things. But the lost



person has the potential for all these things. Here's the scary thing - **even those of us who are saved are capable of these things**. If each of us is perfectly honest, we have to admit that we have done many of these things, either in intent or actuality. And all we can do is cry out, "Oh, God, save me!" Spare me from the judgment that I deserve because of these things! This is what we mean when we use the term "saved". It is being spared from the penalty that we are due for committing these sins.

**Romans 1:32** Although they fully know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but also approve of those who practice them.

Did you get that? Everyone knows these things are wrong, and that we deserve to die for doing them, but we deny it and complain about it. They know what they're doing is wrong, but they do it anyway, because they want to. People aren't even ashamed of what they do any more. They know they're doing wrong, but "it's OK, everybody is doing it". There are three things here:

- (1) They have complete inner knowledge from God that their ways deserve and must have Divine Condemnation and judgment
- (2) They persist in their practices despite the witness of conscience
- (3) They are in a partnership of evil with other evil-doers!

Next lesson we'll continue with chapter 2 of Romans, but I want to close this lesson, after all this heavy stuff, with an exhortation from Paul in the book of Ephesians:

**Ephesians 5:6-11 ISV** (6) Do not let anyone deceive you with meaningless words, for it is because of these things that God becomes angry with those who disobey. (7) So do not be partners with them. (8) For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light, (9) for the fruit that the light produces consists of every form of goodness, righteousness, and truth. (10) Determine what pleases the Lord, (11) and have nothing to do with the unfruitful actions that darkness produces. Instead, expose them for what they are.

**Ephesians 5:15-21 ISV** (15) So, then, be careful how you live. Do not be unwise but wise, (16) making the best use of your time because the times are evil. (17) Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. (18) Stop getting drunk with wine, which leads to wild living, but keep on being filled with the Spirit. (19) Then you will recite to one another psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; you will sing and make music to the Lord with your hearts; (20) you will consistently give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus, the Messiah; (21) and you will submit to one another out of reverence for the Messiah.