

Transcription of 21ID3602

Romans 1:18-23

"Understanding Unbelief" (Part 1)

December 1, 2021

All right. Let's open our Bibles.....oh, by the way, we're having a dedication of a new pastor next Wednesday night, so I hope you'll be here to pray with us and with him as well. Just to recognize what God is doing is always an exciting time. Let's open our Bibles to the book of Romans 1:18 as we continue our in-depth study through this book of Paul's.

In the early spring of 58 or so A.D., Paul was headed for Jerusalem for the last time, his third missionary journey. He stopped in Corinth where he ended up staying for three months. He was introduced to a woman named Phoebe, who was an active member of the church in Cenchrea which happened to be one of the two harbor ports of Corinth. She was headed for Rome, needed someone to kind of write her a letter of introduction that she belonged to the church. Paul had never been to Rome, but he knew some folks there - Aquila and Priscilla to be exact, as well as some other folks that you read about at the end of the book. And so he sat down to write her a letter of recommendation that you have in your Bible as Romans 16. But as he began to write this letter of recommendation, out of his heart came this theological masterpiece. It is hugely an important book. It is often called "the gospel according to grace." It is a powerful book. Saint Augustine read it and gave his life to Christ. So did Martin Luther. So did John Wesley. So did John Bunyan. And many others. So it is a great book. You should know it well. But it is a difficult book in the sense that theology or doctrinal studies require some thinking.

In the first couple of weeks that we spent down through verse 17, Paul spends a lot more time than he would normally do explaining who he was because he'd never met any of these folks, and he wanted them to know who he was. So in the first week we looked at Paul sharing what his life was all about: how God had called him and his ministry, what the message God had given to him. And then last week, from verse 8 down through verse 17, Paul talked about his motives for his ministry; how that he'd prayed so often for these folks that he had never met; how he wanted to be encouraged by them and give to them what God had given to him to share; how he had a sense of obligation - because of his salvation - and was in debt to share all that the Lord had done; and that he was ready to go anywhere because he had this tremendous confidence in God's Word, that it was the power of God unto salvation.

Well tonight we turn the corner from introduction to work. And because of that, we're only going to go through verse 23; so we won't make it too difficult. And we'd like to give you at least a couple of finite statements that Paul makes. The best way I can tell you to learn theology is to write statements of fact that the Bible teaches and then stand with them and see how they're supported. These verses are phenomenal. They are biblically sound. The book of Romans is a theological book until you get to chapter 12:1, and then it says, "Therefore, brethren," and the rest of the book is "live up to what you've read," or "live out what you know to be true."

So, tonight we want to give you some insights into unbelief. The outline for this section is fairly simple: God's wrath is revealed from heaven because man has deliberately rejected the truth of God and then has distorted what he knows to be true through sin. And invariably that leads to fleshly behavior and sinful living.

If you want to outline the book of Romans, here's the best outline I can give you. There are three major subjects, and they're in this order: the sinfulness of man (through chapter 8); then the salvation plan of God to save man from his invariable destruction that will come without His help; and then finally how to change your life so that you can begin to live a godly life rather than a sinful life. So it's sin, salvation, sanctification. That's really what the whole book is about. But, like I said, Paul systematically and clearly teaches these things to us.

So in verse 17, last week, we ended with the words, "The righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith," in the gospel, if you will, because the gospel would teach us that God's righteousness - what God accepts - is only accessible to man through faith in His Son. And literally that's Paul's jumping-off point. Right? In other words, Paul now sets about to show that that is true in every area of life. These are broad strokes of statements, big pictures, universally applied.

But here's what verse 18 says, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." So he starts with these words, "the wrath of God." The idea of a wrathful God is certainly not what wishful thinking man likes to think about - that God could become angry. Yet a real fear of God's possible judgments is often the first motivating factor in considering Christ. It may have brought you to the place where you say to yourself, "I want to be sure I can stand before God." And it is oftentimes that pressure of knowing His judgment that leads evil hearts to begin

to consider what God has to say. Paul, when he wrote to the Corinthians in chapter 5 (2 Corinthians 5:11), said, "Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men; but we are well known to God, and I also trust are well known in your consciences." "But we are driven by knowing the terror of God, that God is angry with man, that God is angry with sin, that God will judge." When Paul spoke to Felix - Luke writes of him, in chapter 24:25 of Acts - that Paul began to reason with Felix about righteousness. "How can you be right with God?" So this was a subject that Paul oftentimes went to as he shared his faith. The judgment of God motivated Paul to know what people might face, and it should motivate us.

If we don't have salvation, we're going to face an angry God. Absolutely just in His anger but angry nonetheless. Robert Atherton, who was a missionary (he died in 1900), was known because he funded countless mission field operations. He had made a lot of money, but he lived very frugally, and he gave most of the money away to the work of the gospel. But the final words that he wrote in his diary before he died, he said, "Gladly I would make the floor my bed and the box my chair and another my table rather than think that some men might perish because of their lack of knowledge of Jesus. I should have told them." Fully realizing the wrath of God should move you to share your faith. If you really believed it, you would be moved by it. And, let's face it, a person cannot appreciate the wonder of God's grace until he first finds himself standing before the perfect demands of God's law. Right? If we think somehow we measure up, then we really don't need a Savior that is so gracious; we can work a little harder or try a little better.

But when we truly realize our position, then we begin to understand the love of God. But we understand the fierceness of His love when we first understand the fierceness of His anger against sinners. We must know that the first thing that we have to appreciate is that the escape from and the deliverance from God's judgment is so wonderful because we deserve it. Right? The word "wrath" here is an interesting Greek word. It's not the capricious kind of uncontrolled, fly-off-the-handle reactions that we face from men. There is a Greek word for that. It is the word "*thumos*," which is where we get the word "thermometers" from. Sometimes we say to people, "He blew his stack." Right? That's where this would come from. But this word is "*orge*," and "*orge*" is a settled, abiding anger toward sin; not aggravated at all, if you will, by the sins of man. But God's position is one of controlled dislike, anger, if you will, constantly so, towards the sinfulness of man. In fact, God's anger throughout the Bible is one of this idea that if sin is not dealt with, judgment will follow. Asaph, in one of the Psalms - Psalm 7:6 - said to

the LORD, "O LORD, in Your anger, raise up in Your rage against my enemies."
"God, You're angry. In that anger, judge those who have come after me." Moses, so aware of his sin from this, said to the LORD, in Psalm 90:7-9, "I know that we're going to be consumed in Your anger and Your wrath, and because of it, we are terrified. You set our iniquities before You, our secret sins in the light of Your countenance. All we, like our days, are passing in Your wrath. We're going to finish our years in a sigh." But he understood that at least the idea of God and His view of man is that God is angry of sin and sinfulness. The prophets often spoke of the anger of God; that "the wrath of the LORD," Isaiah would write, "would fall; that, in His anger, man and beast would be destroyed, and the earth would be burned, and the fires wouldn't be quenched." And the prophets were aware of the fact that God, in His righteousness, can become angry and is so.

We read in John 3:16 about the salvation that we receive if we just turn to the Lord in faith. But twenty verses later, Jesus said, "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." Or, if you will, God's settled anger - which doesn't go away - against sin will spend time laying upon your life. To Paul, in writing to the Ephesians (5:6), he said, "Let no one deceive you with empty words, but because of these things" (this sinful behavior), "the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience." To the Colossians (3:5-6), he made a whole list of fornication and uncleanness and evil desires, and then he said, "Because of these things the wrath of God will come upon you." And so time and time again, there's this picture of a God in heaven who is angry with sin. If you're going to fix a disease, you've got to first realize that it exists before you find a cure. And the Scripture is really devoted to giving us the bad news before it gives us the good news. But the bad news is a good step towards salvation. You've got to come to the point where you're going, "I'm sinful!" And most folks want to get saved because they need something but not necessarily because they're sinful. And yet that's the recognition that we want. Even in our warped, perverted society in which we live, there is still a level of indignation against certain vices and crimes. This gentleman that ran his car over the parade route, this young kid in Michigan that went crazy with a gun and started shooting his classmates - everyone in the world just goes, "That's just wrong!" We know where the line is. The line adjusts as the society does.

But we should know that in heaven God is perfectly angry, consistently, against man's - and here's the description - ungodliness and his unrighteousness. But notice in verse 18 these words, that His "wrath is revealed from heaven." One

thing for sure - God's wrath against sin has been consistently or constantly revealed to man; has been revealed from the beginning. Go to the Scriptures. Go back to the fall of Adam and Eve. Watch the LORD expel them from the Garden and the consequences of their sin that follows them in the years that come - the suffering, the death that follows. The ultimate revelation of God's anger against man's sin you can find at the cross, where God pours out His wrath upon His Son for the sake of God's people, for His people, for you and for me. He carries our sin and faces the full force of God's fury on our behalf. Usually in the Bible, God's anger is delayed by His great mercy. He waits long and, certainly, patiently with us. The Bible does teach that His cup of indignation continues to fill up so that if you don't find a Savior, if you don't come to His Son, that filling up of His wrath will one day be poured out upon you - will certainly be poured out upon the world. We just got done doing the book of Revelation where God's fullness of His wrath is poured out, where there is no more time. Sometimes it is deferred anger from the Lord against sinners that causes us to think we don't need to be repentant. Right? That somehow His patience with us..... "There must not be a wrath of God. I'm just fine." I read a story one day of a farmer who plowed his fields loudly every Sunday outside the church service to disrupt the sermon. And so he'd always tell the congregation when they came out that God didn't exist; just don't bother to come to church. The pastor got mad one time, and he came out and spoke to this gentleman, and he said, "You know, God doesn't settle all of his accounts in October." So sometimes we come to the wrong conclusion about God's anger, but it is clearly made known in the Scriptures. God judges sin. You have His Word on it.

And notice, in verse 18, that His wrath, which is being revealed from heaven, is "against unrighteousness and ungodliness" and then the word "all." Two words that speak of sinning against God and the consequences of that sin. Ungodliness is a wrong relationship with God. It is the violation of the first four commandments. Right? Those relationships that you have with the Lord in that table of the law. It's a lack of reverence and devotion towards God and toward His ways. It is ungodlike - ungodliness. Unrighteousness is the consequence of being ungodly. It is the behavior that follows someone who has chosen to go in a way that doesn't please the Lord. I'm ungodly so I act in an unrighteous manner.

But Paul goes on, and he says this, "the wrath of God being revealed from heaven against ungodliness and unrighteousness in men's lives" are such because they "suppress the truth in" (their) "unrighteousness." In other words, because of our sinful nature, every person is naturally inclined to follow sin while, at the same

time, resisting God. That's our nature. We're going to do what we want. We don't want to follow what God has to say. Paul declared that the obvious truths of God, which are universally known and personally made known by the Lord to us, are willfully set aside by man. He will say, in verse 19, for example, "what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them." That's the internal work. Verse 20, "For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are" (also) "clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse." So man, in sin, suppresses the revelation that God gives to man about Himself, and he doesn't do so passively; he does so actively. If you're a little boy, and you sneak your dog into your bedroom, and you hear your parents come up the stairs, and so you shove the dog into your toy box and sit on the lid, that's pretty much willful suppression of the truth.

All men, regardless of their opportunity to hear the gospel or read the Word of God, are given by God two things: an internal witness to what the truth is and an external proof of who He is to substantiate our need for Him. So these proofs are universal. They are set before every man, and the Bible says, even in this verse, man, because of sin, seeks to repress, suppress, reject and set aside these testimonies from the Lord of who He is. Man fights against God's truth because of his sin. So creation, which cries out, "There must be a Creator;" intelligent design is ignored, man's conscience, which is a gift from God, internally, is now seared over time, and it is set aside as well. So two things God does to cause men to come to Himself: He gives you a conscience, He sets before you a world that demands that you come to the conclusion there's a God. And those are the two things that man, because of his sin, willfully sets aside. Rather than saying, "Well, there's the obvious proof," sin would say, "Regardless of whether that's obvious or even a proof, I'm not going to believe those things. I'm going to turn away." And because of that choice man makes, God is angry.

The Bible teaches us, in Jeremiah, for example, chapter 29:13, if we seek for Him with our whole heart, we find Him. That anytime we turn to the Lord in any way at all, He'll make Himself available. But man will, left to himself, not seek God. He will decide to do just the opposite. He'll run from the things of God. Jesus, in talking to Nicodemus, in John 3:19-20, said, "This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed." So God's anger against man is first and

foremost that he has been given evidence within and without, and yet man has chosen, rather than to be responsible to that revelation, to suppress that truth in their unrighteousness or in their ways of life that really deny that God exists.

Look at verse 19. Here's God's explanation for His wrath. He has revealed Himself to man, revealed to us that He is God, that He is all-powerful, that He is divine. But the unbeliever suppresses the witness of God that he has within and without, and so he's responsible. Look, what their physical senses can perceive, their inner senses can understand. What minds can ponder, hearts can embrace. God gives us the ability to do that. And they're all based on the evidence that He makes available to us. So look at verse 19, "What may be known of God is manifest in them." Every man is born with God's gift of a conscience. The conscience is an innate ability to discern right from wrong. It'll even bring you to an awareness of your own mortality and the fact that God is greater than you are. You'll find yourself humbled before God just because of your conscience. You might not know, but there has been no tribal people every discovered on the planet who are atheists; not one group, none of them who decided there's no God. Every tribal group, no matter who they are, has a form of worship, a god to whom they look, aware of a supreme being, and a fear over being punished if they don't measure up to his wants. That's the work of God in the heart of man.

Notice in verse 19 the word is that "God is manifest in them." God makes Himself known. Here's one thing you don't need. You don't need to be an intellectual to see God or your need for Him. Paul says, at the end of verse 20 here, because of what God gives us to know, we're "without excuse." Even without a Bible in your hand, man can discover God who reveals Himself within and without. In fact, in our very nature, God has placed this desire for eternity. Solomon wrote, in chapter 3:11 of Ecclesiastes, "He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also He has put eternity in their hearts, except that no one can find out the work that God does from beginning to end." But He has placed in the heart of every man a desire to know more than he can perceive on his own. In Lystra, where Paul preached to the Gentiles (Acts 14), without any kind of specific Bible reference, he told these heathens of the God that they should have been aware of. This God who they preached, he said, "He is the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them," which is just an appeal to verse 20. "The God who made everything. He's the God I want to talk to you about, the God that everything you see, everything that you understand, He's the One that I want to tell you. He didn't leave Himself without a witness. He was good to you. He's

brought rain from heaven, He's brought fruitful seasons, He's filled your heart with gladness. That's the God I want to talk to you about." That's not Bible quoting; that's an appeal to the heart of man to respond to what God has given him to know Him. And Paul used that, there in Lystra. When he went up to talk to the philosophers on Mars Hill, who also didn't have a Bible, in Acts 17, he makes the same presentation. "I want to talk to you about the unknown God, the One you worship without knowing Him, the One who is the Lord of heaven, who doesn't dwell in places made with hands. He doesn't need anything, yet He's close to you. He's in charge of every nation, every blood line. He's on the face of the earth. He determines what the appointed times for people are, the boundaries of their lives. That's the Lord. I want to talk to you about the God who's in charge of everything." And so, even without a Bible or a Bible reference, he says to them, "God controls nations and boundaries and destinies and time and seasons," and he says, "You can know Him."

God manifests Himself. The word means to pull the covers away. God is angry. His anger from heaven is displayed against those who are ungodly and unrighteous because they suppress the truth in their unrighteous behavior, because what we can know of God has been made clear in them - God has shown it to them - and "since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse." God has made the invisible visible to us. In terms of what? In terms of who He was, His eternal power and Godhead, so that we're without excuse. Look, eternal in the sense that the Creator has to come before creation. Right? And the language of creation is universal. David, in writing Psalm 19:1-3, "The heavens declare" what? "the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard." It's universal. God says, here in verse 20, through Paul, "You can know the God of creation by the fact He has made all things. And so you might not see Him, but His attributes become clear." It screams there is a God, and design makes that self-evident.

We were in Costa Rica a few years ago, and there's a little archer - it's called an archer fish - a little thing, but it spits water 10' and knocks bugs off of branches. Just "pfft", ding, and then he goes over and eats 'em. Like the coolest thing ever! I don't know how that thing figured that out, but it did. There's a bombardier beetle that we also happened to run across in Costa Rica - where they seem to have

a bug for everything - but the bombardier beetle produces two very different chemicals, but when they combine, they explode. But they only combine as he kind of emits them in the face of his enemies, and then these two "boom," and it kills.....and then he has dinner. I mean, it's the most amazing thing, and yet he's never harmed by that.

There is a God. Even people without any kind of understanding of the Bible have to come to that conclusion. The evidence is overwhelming. The intricacies are inconceivable without an organized mind and a Creator behind them. There is a Master Designer. It's amazing because man is usually pretty rational. We've been building now for two years. We spent I don't know how many hours and months with architects and soil samples. You can't begin to....you'd like just the building to go, but that doesn't work that way. You've got to be with all these people. It just doesn't work itself out. If you build a home, there're a lot of things you're going to have to go through. But it's all about organization. Right? And planning. Of having someone who's in charge to design and figure out loads and balances and "will that stay up?" It's a good thing whoever figured these out (the rafters in the Fellowship Hall) are staying up. Aren't you glad? That doesn't just happen. It didn't just happen. People stayed here for days and months. But you can't grab a bag of dust and shake it once in a while and then expect a Rolex watch to fall out.

Kepler, who is the father of modern astronomy, wrote in his book that the order found in the universe should never leave behind an undevout astronomer. In other words, if this doesn't convince you, what will? And God says His anger is evidenced from heaven because man has the capacity to know Him or at least to seek after Him - in his heart, in his conscience and in creation as well.

If I put ten pennies in my pocket, I number them 1 to 10 and try to pull out number 1, what are the odds that I would do that? Great mathematicians, all of you. (Laughing) One in ten, right? If I try to do 1 and then 2, the odds would be about 1 in 100. If I try to pull out 1 through 10, in order, it would be about 1 in 10 billion. Now that is far short of the odds that the world today has evolved to the present state by blind chance. Every unbeliever has this witness from God within him and around him, before his eyes. In fact, if you go read Job 38 and 39, God uses that as a basic truth in His questioning of Job. "What do you do with what you see? And how did it get here if I'm not the LORD?" Yet nature can only, I think, whet our appetites, if you will. It can only shove us in the right direction. Nature knows nothing about the love of God, nothing about God's forgiveness. No moral code in

nature, either, because of sin. Makes no mention of a Savior; that's found in the Word of God and at Calvary. But nature is God's calling card that man seeks to constantly oppress and suppress. When Napoleon was on his warship with his men, his men, we are told, one time began to mock God. And he walked up to them one night and pointed to the stars and said, "If you're going to mock God, you're going to have to get rid of those." Man can know God. It was a knowledge of Him - without a trust in Him or a personal relationship with Him - that prompted Pharaoh to be able to exclaim one time to Moses, "I've sinned against the LORD your God" (Exodus 10:16). He didn't know who it was, but he knew he was in trouble, knew where he was standing was a difficult place. The Philistines, there in 1 Samuel 4, were so afraid when they had taken the ark and all, and they said, "We're in the place of the gods that live amongst us, and what shall we do?" The king of Nineveh (Jonah 3) had everyone bow down. He didn't know who this God was, but he knew that maybe there was hope with Him and, "If we repent, maybe we'll find Him." Any heart that turns to the Lord will be met with more revelation. But that's usually not the case. Men suppress the truth because they'd rather be unrighteous, do what God doesn't accept. The Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8), hungry for the Lord on his way home, saw the Lord send Philip right to his chariot to tell him the way. Cornelius, we read (Acts 10), is a devout man who prayed often and sought God; wasn't disappointed. God sent him the answer. Lydia, a true worshipper of God in a city that had nothing to do with the Lord, sat down and began to seek God, and God sent Paul to her there to speak to her about who He was, and God opened her heart (Acts 16). So, we can learn that there's a Designer and that He's divine and that He's powerful, and yet sin will seek to suppress that revelation from God, both in our consciences but also in our understanding in our minds.

Because of that, verse 21 says, "Because, although they knew God," (or there was potential there) "they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools." God's judgment and wrath fall upon man's willing rejection of Him. And don't miss the word "willing." "Though they knew God." Though the opportunity to know God is there and to respond to God, but they don't take advantage of it to seek Him; and man has the evidence, and he's given the capacity, but he refuses it, and he corrupts what he has learned, and he turns it around for his own purposes. God has given to man a brain to smelt iron, to make a hammerhead, to fashion nails, to cut down a tree, and the wisdom to make a handle. But then God puts out His hand, and man drives those nails through His hands as a

supreme demonstration "they're without excuse." They have all of the wisdom but nothing to respond to. They wouldn't, notice what it says in verse 21, "they could know Him as God, but they wouldn't glorify Him as God." The basic root of man's sin has always been pride. It's always pride. You see it in those who, knowing God, decide not to honor Him or to follow Him, refuse to submit to Him. This is called choice. They made a choice. And neither were they thankful or, if you will, ingratitude was added to unbelief. Although God is the source of all goodness, there's no thankfulness in their heart or any sense of indebtedness because they have set God aside.

And so what happens as a result? Well, look at the progression. They go from refusing His witness to excusing their behavior; refusing this insight to excusing their behavior. To reject God is to turn from the greatest reality in the universe, one that will give you purpose in meeting an understanding of what God wants from you. If you dethrone God in your thinking, and you enthrone yourself - which is all that you have left, then - your rationale will just plunge you deeper and deeper into darkness. Evolution is given to the intellectual, taught in colleges for the most part. Not because there's any substantiation to it - because there's not, not one bit of support - but it does allow unbelieving man to explain the universe in terms of natural cause without having to acknowledge God. So when he could know God, he refuses to know God, and he comes up with belief systems that turn him away from God. And if you turn away from God's revelation of Himself, you invariably go down this progressive degenerative road of blindness. To forsake God is to exchange truth for a lie. Meaning becomes hopelessness. Satisfaction becomes emptiness. With an empty mind and an empty soul, you become a vacuum that can suck in all the darkness of the world. And the foolish heart who rejects God isn't enlightened, he's not free. He might be sophisticated, but he becomes a slave to sin.

So, what does it say here in verse 21? Because they didn't recognize Him as the Lord, didn't glorify Him, weren't thankful, they "became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened." The word "hearts" in the Bible, by the way, is a very comprehensive word. It usually refers to all of man's faculties. So, darkness comes to the intellect, darkness comes to the will, darkness comes to the mind, darkness comes to the emotions, darkness comes from your ability to reason, and darkness comes from your ability even to believe. The glory of God is lost because you suppress the truth, and you pervert the truth with a lie. That's what man does. That's how God sees the world. That's why His judgment comes. This

evidence should bring men to the Lord, but instead, man willfully rejects God's revelation of Himself, dethrones God - takes Him off that place of authority - from his thinking, rejects the testimony of his own conscience and his mind and his reason and the creation about him, and he's left with an empty mind and a darkened heart. And the Lord calls him a fool. Every human being knows he ought to give himself to his Creator. But refusing - and that's a choice that you make - he heads for godlessness and thanklessness. Not able to be free, he just becomes bound.

And as verse 22 and verse 23 will tell us, he turns himself to human reason and to idolatry. Imagine having a whole race of people who know better but refuse, who won't submit to the Lord, while all the time they are eating daily from His hand, they are relying on Him for the very breath that they breathe, and yet they defy Him at every turn. And then it says the Lord is angry. And you go, "Well of course He's angry! What more can He do for man?" So God's judgment. And Paul wants to make a case that man is brutally and awfully sinful and needs some help to get out. That's his point. So that you'll be hanging on to the grace of God like never before. But this is God's description of our lives without Him.

Verse 22, "Professing to be wise, they became fools." For the second time in two verses, the word "fool" is used. If you reject God, you're going to have to justify yourself. And the way you do that is you profess to be smarter than God. David had, centuries earlier, declared (Psalm 14:1) only "the fool says there is no God." The mind that is devoid of God's truth has no ability to discriminate. Now you don't know good from evil, the conscience becomes hardened, no way to tell the truth from the wrong. Relativism is born, which is kind of like, "Well, there're really no absolute truths now. Everybody feels different." I don't know if you've noticed over the years - and maybe it doesn't concern you so much - but there's a big move in the church to begin to teach theistic evolution, which is a crazy idea, a theory that says that God just started the evolutionary process and then He let it go. So that you can begin to mix evolution with creation, which obviously makes creation invalid, or even the testimony of God, in seven days, making the earth that we're in. There're modern views of psychology and sociology and anthropology that exchange the truth of God's relationship with man or His desire with man's absurd conjectures about himself. There are lots of (even) institutions that once firmly stood on the Word of God that have progressively accommodated themselves to the intellectual foolishness of the world apart from God. And the greatest fool is someone who trades God's truth for the wisdom of man. If you start to do that, you're the fool. Because God knows, and we don't know. We certainly don't want to

do that. To ignore the truth of God is to be a fool. To rule God out of your life is to head down a road of eternal darkness. You know, the Bible says it is the fear of the LORD that leads to wisdom and knowledge (Proverbs 9:10). A fear of the LORD. Right? Yet without that, we come to declare that God doesn't exist and that man evolved from monkeys, and the path changes from the fear of the LORD to, now, this wide road that leads to destruction. So, man's rationalization, notice. Not acknowledging God, not fearing God, no restraints anymore, no need for grace, no need.....and pretty soon sin is removed from the dictionary. God's anger against man is because he suppresses the truth of God by his lifestyle. What can be known of God? God showed them in their conscience, verse 20, showed them in His creation. You can know God. But with all of that information, man, because of sin, doesn't turn to glorify God, isn't thankful for the things God has given him, but he turns, in his futility, to his own thoughts. He professes himself to be wise. His heart and everything about him is darkness.

And the final step is, verse 23, "He changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man - and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things." Ultimately this gives birth to man's religion. The word "fool," by the way, in verse 22 is the word "moron," "moronic" actually. He can't shake the witness he has seen, and though he rejects God, he still has to be worshipping because God makes us to worship. And so, because we are created that way, he has to go off to worship someone or something other than the God that has made Himself known. And what he is reduced to is to make an idolatrous god that he can then bow his knees to. Isn't it amazing to you that otherwise very cultured individuals can find themselves worshipping idols? I mean, how stupid is this?! How moronic is that! Education won't alleviate it. Cultural diversity or social advancement won't get rid of it. Idolatry is a spiritual problem, and it is rooted in satanic opposition. Go to India where everything is sacred - the cow, the crocodile, the monkey. Kill a cow, it's like murdering an individual. There are 200 million cows grazing freely across a vast majority of India while 50% of their population starves to death. The Greeks were known for their great intellects. Yet when the Romans came to overthrow them, they wrote in their overthrow papers it was easier to find a god in Athens than a man. So while you reject God, they're not able to remove Him from their conscience. And so what do they do? They make a god like man, only a little less than man so that he can be over him. So they have eyes, but they can't see; and mouths but they can't speak (Psalm 135:16). And so it goes. So they begin to deify animals, insects. It's amazing what you will worship and bow before once God has been set aside. And the ultimate insult is to replace

God with His creation - a bird, a four-legged creature, a reptile. There's this downward trend. Serpent worship among the Chaldeans. Calf worship among the Egyptians. Cow worship in India. Make a list. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and they take the glory of God, which God has revealed, and they make an image that is more like a corruptible man. And so this downward process continues.

In fact, in verse 24 the Lord will say, because of this, "Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator." And "God" will, over time, "give them up to vile passions." And certainly one of the last steps in any society is when it heads down this road. And you will read again, in verse 26, and again, in verse 28, "God gave them up." Verse 24, "God gave them up," verse 26, "God gave them up," verse 28, "God gave them over." Because God's judgment is if that's what you want, then you can have that. And I think you can see that in this society, the way things are going.

So, Paul's point, as he begins this long letter to us about sin, is that the first distinctive of unbelief is that man willfully suppresses the truth in his life that God has given him because he'd rather live an unrighteous life. In other words, that's more appealing than the truth. You got the truth. God gave it to you in your heart. God gave it to you in His creation. There's no way you can really escape them. God has set them, if you will, before you. It's been revealed from heaven. Man has an unmistakable conscience, and he has an unmistakable witness before him in creation. And that the second distinctive about sin is that we pervert the truth through sinful rationalization, and we do that because we think we're smarter, we profess ourselves to be wise, we start to chase after the things that we believe to be true, we set God's Word aside, and man begins to be his own god. And if you look at those that he worships, it comes down to that same thing: man has a religion because it has replaced God, but he ends up being a fool.

So it's a big deal, this issue of sin, isn't it? And it sure has a lot of destructive forces. And I think, by the time we get to the end of chapter 1 next week, we're going to see that there's this downward course not just in man's life but in humanity's life and that this downward course heads for the place that we have no hope. And we find ourselves kind of in a place that we can't deliver ourselves, so that Paul was able to finally say, when we get to chapter 8:1, that "there's no

condemnation to those who are in Christ." And if you find Jesus, you can get out of all of these things. But it is first important that we grab hold of how God feels about our sin and man's response to it. Because from God's perspective, He is angry from heaven against man who has been given insight and yet has not chosen to use it but has, instead, willfully set God's revelation aside so that he can live a life on his own without God and make a god after his own heart. That's pretty frightening, but that's the way we go. Now fortunately you've all come to Him, right, and given Him your life.

Next week we'll try to pick up as we go. It's going to get happier, I'm sure of it. Just hang in there, would you?

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
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