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Church

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Why Does the World Not Work Right?

Romans 1:18–32

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series: Romans: Unashamed • Undeserved • Unstoppable

At 1:25 pm today my beloved Green Bay Packers will be playing the 49'ers in Levi Stadium. My team is off to a great start—they are undefeated. I heard this week that the coaching staff said that their greatest challenge to prepare for the 49'ers was to prepare their team for the warm temperatures expected on the field at Levi Stadium. Their biggest challenge was the weather? There is no other team on the field that has given them headaches again and again in their past? I worry about my team today. Pride always happens before the fall. And speaking of pride before the fall...

There is a spectacular site of ancient ruins just a short trip outside of the old city of Jerusalem. The area was controlled by the Egyptians 5,000 years ago, at the height of the Egyptian Empire. Later, the Philistines were in control as they moved eastward from the Mediterranean ocean. King Saul waged war against the Philistines trying to drive them back. A famous battle took place at Mt. Gilboa. That is where the disgraced King Saul fell on his sword and died. Later King David conquered and named the city Beit She'an. After David's kingdom divided, the Greeks eventually conquered the region and renamed the city Scythopolis. In the life and times of Jesus, the Romans were in charge, but Scythopolis was the most prosperous city in the entire Decapolis region.

It was an archeologist's dream come true. A few years ago I stood among these ruins. I thought of a bustling city, kind of a scaled down Rome. The city was a few miles south of the Sea of Galilee and Jesus' boyhood home in Nazareth was 5 miles to the west. Joseph likely took his son Jesus with him for carpentry jobs there. Jesus and his friends likely ran through the city, maybe peering through cracks in the wall around the amphitheater to watch the latest Greek play acted out on the stage. The city was built at an intersection of the major north south and east west highways that connected Asia Minor and Egypt and the Mediterranean and the Arab countries so Scythopolis could reach every corner of the known world and every corner of the known world could reach Scythopolis.

There was a well-traveled road leading into the city that was lined with large Corinthian columns. They uncovered ruins of large agora shopping areas, Roman baths and residential sections. They found a temple where people came to worship their gods. Temple prostitutes enticed worshippers from all over the Roman Empire, this wealthy and advanced civilization, probably full of smart and hard working people, but curiously given over to strange and perverse behavior.

The Greeks and the Romans had a double standard just as we do. They talk of virtue and character but turn a blind eye to sexual excesses. I was reading this week that in Greek high culture an older male was expected to maintain a same-sex relationship

with a much younger partner. In their wisdom they not only condoned pedophilia, they considered it part of their education. Can we see why Paul was beaten, arrested and ridiculed? Can you see why he received the challenge to not be ashamed of the gospel? In 600 AD the Muslims invaded. In 749 the great Golan earthquake destroyed the entire city. God had had enough. This is what is left.

*"A voice says, 'Cry out.' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All people are like grass, and all their faithfulness is like the flowers of the field. The grass withers and the flowers fall, because the breath of the Lord blows on them. Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God endures forever" (Isaiah 40:6-8).*

*"Before him all the nations are as nothing; they are regarded by him as worthless and less than nothing. With whom, then, will you compare God? To what image will you liken him?" (verses 12-15).*

*"He brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing. No sooner are they planted, no sooner are they sown, no sooner do they take root in the ground, than he blows on them and they wither, and a whirlwind sweeps them away like chaff" (verses 21-24).*

Have you ever wondered... maybe even especially this week as you hear of students and faculty being gunned down in an Oregon School, or Christians being beheaded in Iraq and Syria. Have you ever wondered why the world doesn't work right?

Theologian CK Chesterton after seeing a series of articles on "What's Wrong with the World?" sent a short letter to the editor. "Dear Sir: Regarding your article 'What's Wrong with the World?' I am. Yours truly, GK Chesterton." For the world to work right, the heart needs to be made right.

For the past three weeks in Romans, we have celebrated the really great good news of the gospel. We have learned about Paul the writer, his audience in Rome, where the gospel came from, what the Gospel provides us, and why we should be unashamed to share it with others. We learned that the gospel is the only hope for the unrighteous. We learned that the gospel is God's plan for salvation. That righteousness cannot be earned or manufactured by us. The righteousness that saves us is God's righteousness. It comes from him and it is given to us. And it can only be received by us on faith.

In verses 18-32, Paul gets very real and very raw about why the world doesn't work right. He lays out a logical evidential argument as his answer. And at the outset in verse 18 he uses the word "wrath" to describe how God feels about the state of our world. The wrath of God is something we don't like to talk about much at parties or on the patio between services.

## **The Wrath of God is Being Revealed**

**The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, (v. 18a).**

In the original language wrath means anger. Literally God is angry at evil. The idea is that this anger builds or grows ripe over time like water building behind a dam and overflows from heaven and spills down on earth. The verb tense means continually being revealed to various degrees on earth. We might add that scripture tells us that God's wrath will be revealed in its fullness in the last days in the future according to the book of Revelation. When we get angry and blow it's usually because our pride is wounded. But in Paul's context God's wrath is "being revealed" as controlled and deliberate and totally justified, that it's a reasonable expression from his righteous character expressed through his perfect love, patience, mercy and holiness. In the original language the idea of godlessness is being against God. It's an aggressive in-your-face, stand-up-to, shake-your-fists-at-God type of non-reverence and wickedness of people.

Paul goes on to say that the wrath is being revealed because people suppress the truth.

### **Because People Suppress the Truth**

**...who suppress the truth by their wickedness, (v. 18b).**

The idea is that in our wickedness we hold down the truth. We know truth, but we prefer our sin over where the revelation of God's truth might take us. This is an attempt to get rid of God, and since that is impossible, it's a determination to live as if God doesn't exist. That road to Scythopolis ruin begins with determining to live as if God doesn't exist. Paul says later, "There is no fear of God before their eyes." It's as if people have this bent in their nature to suppress God's truth. How do they suppress the truth? His argument continues:

### **Because People Deny What is in Plain Sight**

**...since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. 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 people are without excuse (verses 19-20).**

Paul is saying that evidence of a creator through creation itself is in plain sight. To not acknowledge what is in plain sight is to deny what is in plain sight. What has been seen in creation? His invisible qualities:

**Eternal Power.** God's Omnipotence. We can gaze through a telescope, or visit a national park and see evidence of his magnificent size and power. It should be plain to see that awesome power was required and implemented to create and sustain the universe.

**Divine Nature.** God's kindness and graciousness should be clearly seen as needed on earth to create a place for a good life. We can peer through a microscope and see evidence of complex intricate beauty. With our naked eye, we can see the diversity of

plants and animals, order, reproduction, sustainability. We see that God created a place for us to live, love, work and play. We can each observe examples of love, sacrifice and mercy shown between people.

Theologians call this idea, "General Revelation." If people would step off the road to Scythopolis for just a moment and open their eyes and heart to observe nature itself, it's sufficient proof of an intelligent designer behind it all. It leaves us without excuse. We don't even need to contemplate the words, person and work of Jesus to believe there is a God in charge.

President Theodore Roosevelt's love of the outdoors is well documented. He was responsible for the creation of several national parks and monuments. In his first inaugural address, he spoke freely of the blessings of God upon our nation, saying, "I reverently invoke for my guidance the direction and favor of Almighty God."

It is said that when President Roosevelt entertained diplomatic guests at the White House he was fond of taking them out to the back lawn at the end of the day. As the president stood gazing at the night sky, all eyes would eventually be cast heavenward, as his were. In his day, the vast array of stars was not dimmed by the city lights, and the magnificent display of God's brilliant creation would overcome the party. After a long moment, Mr. Roosevelt would say, "Gentlemen, I believe we are small enough now. Let's go to bed.

But claiming to be wise, claiming to be big, they became fools. The idea is delusional. Delusional means to stick to a false belief or opinion that defies logic, reason and evidence. It's as if smart people become dumb. People who have eyes seem to go blind. Why? Because they hated God.

### **Because People Hate God**

What is it that people hate about God? We hated his Sovereignty because that means that God has a right to rule. Remember Adam? He wanted to be like God when he ate the fruit in the garden. He wanted to be sovereign.

We hated his Holiness. Why? Because when his holiness clashes with our sinfulness we are exposed for who we are and it's uncomfortable and threatening. For those who love their unregenerate life, they run from holiness.

We hate his Omniscience. Why? We hate that he knows who we are deep inside. We have hidden ourselves from others, but we can't hide from God.

We hate his Unchanging Ways. Why? Because we like our own moral standards and ethics based on what we want them to be. We want God to get with the times and approve of our standards. But if he is the same yesterday, today and forever, his truth doesn't evolve.

**For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like**

## **a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles (verses 21-23).**

We know Paul's heart for people and it must have been very difficult for him to expose the ugly truth here. But it's as if he unashamedly declares, "They love their gods created in their own imaginations, and they faithfully offer sacrifices hoping for fulfillment."

Does it end here? Does God abandon them? When people happily move this far from God, does God give up on them? Thank God the answer is no. God's love never ceases. He wishes that none should perish. But in the next nine verses we see God practice tough love.

### **Therefore God "Gave Them Over"**

Three times Paul uses this phrase "gave them over." The idea is that humanity's complete rejection of God left God no other choice but to practice tough love and give them over to their sin. Each time Paul says, "gave them over" he is describing a progression down the slippery slope of ruin. On the surface it looks like abandonment, but in reality it's that people are happily skipping down the road to Scythopolis.

The idea is that God gave them over means that God withdraws his protection allowing the consequences of sin to have its destructive effect on individuals, marriages, families, neighborhoods, cities and nations. The Greek word for "gave over" is active, not passive. Paul chooses the same Greek word used in the Gospels to describe the ordeal Jesus endured. He was given over by Judas to the Sanhedrin. Given over by the Sanhedrin to Pilate. Given over by Pilate to the soldiers for scourging and crucifixion. Finally Jesus gave up his spirit.

The idea is that God hands over humanity to travel down that road to ruin, not out of frustration because somehow he is out of power or options, but it was intentional to accomplish a specific purpose. For some it's to get the wrath they are choosing. For others to go as low as they can go so that they can only look one direction, so low they can only look up.

### **They Exchanged Truth for a Lie**

**Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen (verses 24-25).**

So God gives them over to what they want. God is saying that sinful desire, literally that over-desire that you totally crave, I will release you to go after it. And you will get to the point that it will come out of your nostrils. It will enslave you. You will have so much of it you will hate it. The context here is sexual sins. Idol worship distorts our thinking of God and distorts our thinking about our identity as a child of God and that we are created in God's image, and this distortion always seems to lead to some kind of sexual sin. Sexual sin here refers to any sexual activity outside of the safe and sanctioned marriage relationship.

Getting off the road to Scythopolis means to stop suppressing the truth and start praising the Creator. If you are exchanging the truth for a lie, thank God he has revealed that to you and turn back to God and trust his truth. But Paul gets more raw as he shows the further progression. From exchanging truth for a lie to exchanging the natural for the unnatural.

### **They Exchanged Natural for Unnatural**

**Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error (verses 26-27).**

This is one of the more controversial passages in Scripture and the longest passage in the Bible on homosexuality. It takes on even more interest to us in light of the recent Supreme Court ruling that said that every state is required to recognize and affirm a marriage between two people of the same sex. As I have studied this passage, I cannot see how these verses could be interpreted as anything other than another example of sinful behavior on the road to Scythopolis.

Some interpreters see this differently. It's been interpreted to be referring to abusive homosexuality as the sinful behavior, not the kind of behavior that happens between two who consent into a monogamous homosexual relationship. But these verses clearly speak of relationships between mutually consenting men. This is generic homosexuality Paul is speaking of as unnatural.

Some interpreters believe Paul condemns men and women who give up natural sexual relations for unnatural ones as a warning to "stay true" to their personal sexual nature. In other words, if you consider your personal sexual nature to be heterosexual, then engaging in a same-sex relationship is unnatural for you and therefore a sin. But if my personal sexual nature is to be homosexual, then it would be unnatural for me to engage in a heterosexual relationship. In fact the word "natural" that Paul uses here doesn't refer to someone's personal sexual nature; it refers to God's created design in nature, how it was to be from the beginning. To seek sexual satisfaction in a way different from what God created is not worshipping God. It's worshipping the creation. Furthermore, no where in the Bible is there an example of good homosexuality. Paul could have found it in Greek and Roman literature, but not in God's Word.

It's important to understand that while homosexuality is a sin, it's not to be put in a category of "worst sin." All sexual immorality is sinful. And Paul is about to list out 21 other sinful behaviors that he calls wickedness. Every sin listed in verses 28-32 should be seen as equally deserving of God's wrath.

But let's be clear, homosexual sin is bowing to an idol in the place of God and is another way to try to satisfy desires outside of God's will and lordship over our lives. For one to stay actively practicing homosexuality in an unrepentant pattern of behavior

is indicative of a rejection of Jesus' lordship and results in abandonment, but never outside of his grace reach.

It is important for you to know that CPC pastors will not officiate same-sex marriages. It's also important for you to know that CPC pastors will not officiate marriages for heterosexual couples who live together either. With that said, our hearts are to encourage faith, hope and love for people who are struggling and desire help from the effects of same-sex relationships in their lives. In fact we have a ministry called **faith | hope | love** listed in your bulletin for people in our church who need support because they have family members who are struggling with same-sex attraction.

Pick up a copy or download from our website a copy of CPC's updated Position Paper on Same-Sex Marriage and read it and share it. I have used that paper to minister to people far away from CPC long before I ever met Mark or the elders. Or attend an event that will be held at our Foster City Campus Sunday afternoon October 11 to watch a video titled, "Such Were Some of You." It's an inspiring documentary on how Jesus Christ brings healing from the things that contribute to same-sex attractions. We will have overcomers in attendance to share their stories with you of how God brought them out of an active homosexual lifestyle. We believe that God can heal anyone from anything while providing love and grace for the journey.

It's from the heart of staff and elders to bring grace and truth to people who want help because they are struggling with same-sex attraction. Regarding any kind of sexual sin—homosexual or heterosexual—God is full of grace. His grace means you can be healed of your sexual wounds, whether others inflicted it upon you or you brought it on yourself. Grace means that you can overcome whatever distorted, destructive desires that have been robbing you of real joy and fulfillment.

If you are having trouble finding yourself relating to the previous verses, I think you may find verses 28-32 interesting. Every person needs the righteousness of God. Paul goes on explain that the reason this world doesn't work right is that people reject the truth, reject what is natural and exchange a fit mind for an unfit mind.

### **They Exchanged a Fit Mind for an Unfit Mind**

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become 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 have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. 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 (verses 28-32).**

If we were to end right now, we end in a very dark place. I tried to find a picture of the darkest place I could imagine. For you it may be another place. For me it was Ground Zero on 9/11. It's a place of terror, fear, and evil seeking to destroy. And out of this ruthless attack we all saw and heard stories of heroic people. Trapped office workers leading their co-workers in prayers to Jesus before their building collapsed. First responders rushing up stairways doing their duty to try to rescue those trapped on the upper floors never to return home.

So from the twisted rubble at Ground Zero where almost 3000 people perished, the workers cleared an area and found a cross standing tall above the ruins. It's a reminder of the hope humanity has in Christ. It's a reminder that in a world that doesn't work right, Christ has done the perfectly right work. The cross reminds us of who saves us from sin and wickedness.

For Christians the empty cross is Jesus' Ground Zero. Sinful man happy in their sin crucified an innocent man. The Bible says that if we were there, we would have "given over" Jesus to be crucified. It was from our depravity that we flew a plane right into the heart of God. But out of the ashes and ruins came a story of hope... an empty cross. His death brought us freedom. Through his death, the power of God crushed the power of sin and death. The power of God crushed the power of fear, shame and condemnation for all of us who believe and accept what he did for us on the cross and have received him as our Lord and Savior.

Amidst all the bad news we shared today, these communion elements speak of the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus our first responder rushed to our Ground Zero and gave his life to rescue us out of our ashes to bring us life and hope.

Whenever our consciences tell us we haven't earned God's love by more good works... whenever we are tempted to run down the road to Scythopolis, or wallow in guilt and condemnation... when we are tempted to give up on loved ones on that road... the gospel takes us right back to Ground Zero—The Cross. *"He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed"* (1 Peter 2:24).

We talked a lot about wrath this morning. The scripture teaches us that the wrath of God we deserved was poured out on Jesus instead of us as he hung there bleeding on the cross. *"Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!"* (Romans 5:9).

The hopeless road that was intended to end in death and ruin was blocked by hope, hope that comes to us as an empty cross and through a resurrected Savior. Praise be to God!

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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