



In Mark's sermon last week on Romans 1:16–17 God's Word said that the power of God brings salvation to everyone who believes. When a person experiences salvation, verse 17 tells us that they receive something: the righteousness of God. It's freely given to a person. This is so amazing and powerful, we should never be ashamed of telling others about it. This is **great** news. It's the message of the gospel!

But what happens when people reject God and his gospel? What happens to the heart of an individual? What happens to a family? What becomes of a city? A nation? Our passage of scripture today answers these questions.

Similar to the horrible state of things in Batman's city of Gotham, our scripture today shows us that people and families and cultures will spiral deeper and deeper into rebellion and wickedness as they reject God and his offer of salvation. What a sad and heartbreaking description of what happens because people reject God's offer of love and salvation. From Romans 1:18–32 we're going to see these steps in the downward spiral:

- People suppress the truth of God
- God is stirred to holy wrath
- God gave them over

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.

These are sobering and sad verses describing humanity's rebellion. The Creator God who is filled with graciousness and compassion and unconditional love is being mocked, ignored and disobeyed.

People Suppress the Truth of God

Verse 18 describes this dire situation with the phrase *“they suppress the truth by their wickedness.”* The truth and existence of God are like a giant spring. In order for a person to suppresses it, they have to exert force on it. But the spring is always there, ready to expand at any moment.

It's funny to me that many people today think the opposite is true. People think that Christianity is a suppression of truth. They think humanity is held back by the Christian's blind faith in an imaginary God. But, according to Paul, the opposite is true. There are three descriptions of how people suppress God's truth given here. Paul says it is:

“plain to them” (v. 19)

they “knew God” (v. 21)

they “know God's righteous decrees” (v. 32)

It's as if man has this built-in natural desire to suppress and oppose God's truth. We go to a lot of effort to push it down!

There are many ways we suppress God's truth. Take morality as one example. If there is no God, then who has the right to say what's right and what's wrong? Without God, how can we find any moral absolutes? Today, morality is mostly determined by the majority. And so we've seen a dramatic paradigm in culture when it comes to sexuality. But, if morality is defined by the majority and not God, then slavery wasn't wrong 300 years ago. Morality must be defined by a moral absolute, by God. But that truth is suppressed. This brings all kinds of problems. The downward spiral begins and then we come to Step 2.

God is Stirred to Holy Wrath

God doesn't take suppressing his truth lightly. Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth and the life.*" So part of his reaction here is based simply on the offense of humanity's arrogance. The created is giving the Creator the finger. That makes God angry.

Another reason this makes God angry is the destruction brought onto others by humanity's wickedness. Former United Nations leader Kofi Annan used to travel the world visiting areas with some of the worst violence and cruelty in human history. Few men have had the responsibility to face such evil worldwide. Fewer still try to find a solution to such complex and insurmountable problems. When Annan prays, he often wonders about man's cruelty to man. "I'm still struggling with evil," he says. "I still don't understand how there can be so much evil...You look at the impact; you see young people who have no hope."

God's heart isn't just broken by this; he is filled with wrath. The Greek word for "wrath" is *orgai*. The English word that derives from *orgai* is *orgy*. R.C. Spoul explains the connection this way: "When we think of an *orgy*, we think of participation in unbridled sexual behavior, eroticism with reckless abandon. The point of contact between the English word *orgy* and the Greek word for wrath is that God is not simply annoyed or irritated; God's anger is one of passion with paroxysms of rage and fury."

Understand that this wrath is holy because God himself is always holy. This is so difficult for us to comprehend because almost all of the anger and wrath we experience comes from sinful people.

A quick internet search on anger will reveal lots of classes on "managing your anger." These classes are needed because insecure, broken and messed up people let their wrath fly. Unfortunately, some of you have been on the receiving end of this kind of wrath. That is not the kind of wrath God possess. His wrath is always holy and perfectly justified.

It's difficult to illustrate this but I want to try. Do you remember the movie *The Patriot*? In this movie, Mel Gibson plays the role of a Colonialist father who refuses to join the fight against England. He just wanted to lead a peaceful life on his farm. However,

when one of his sons is senselessly shot and killed by a wicked English Colonel and then his entire farm is burned by this same Colonel, Gibson is filled with wrath and he joins the fight against the English. And every man watching that movie is thinking, "I'd do the same thing. Don't mess with my family."

Another example: Think about human trafficking. If your child or grandchild was kidnapped and forced into sex slavery, I hope you'd be filled with wrath. You should be!

There are times when wrath is a perfect reaction. These verses are telling us that when people suppress the truth of God, wickedness and godlessness run without restraint and that's a time when God's holy wrath is justified. Some of you are thinking that this doesn't seem to align with God being love. 1 John 4:8 says that "*God is love.*" Romans 5:8 says "*God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*"

Wrath and love? How can they co-exist in the same being? This is a paradox and complexity that would justify an entire sermon. For now, let me alleviate some of the tension you might be feeling by directing your attention back to verse 18.

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people ...

The word "of" is important. This wrath that's being expressed is directed against the behavior of people, not against the person. The verse doesn't say that "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godless and wicked people." God is so lovingly dedicated to every person that he always offers grace and salvation. That's love. "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*" (John 3:16).

However, he has holy wrath concerning their disrespect toward him and their hurtful, rebellious and wicked actions. Isn't this the balance a great parent exhibits when their child is rebellious? When I was 12 a bunch of us kicked in the sheet rock walls of a house under construction. We got caught. What do you suppose my parents felt about my actions? Something like wrath. What do you suppose my parents felt about me? They loved me.

There's no problem with God being perfectly loving toward people and perfectly wrathful at rebellious action at the same time. In fact, I'd say this is a necessary byproduct of the holiness of God. The holy God of the universe is wrapped up in painful, passionate disappointed ... wrath ... by the behavior of humanity.

I hope this brings some clarity to any confusion you might have had about God possessing wrath. I understand how this causes people to be uncomfortable. I hear it all the time from Christians and non-Christians, "My God is a God of love, not a God of wrath."

The Presbyterian Church (USA), a mainline denomination, recently went so far as to remove the great hymn *In Christ Alone* from their hymnal because of the line about God's wrath ("The wrath of God was satisfied"). That lyric is talking about the death of Jesus Christ on the cross; it satisfied the wrath of God. Jesus took God's wrath so that anyone who called on his name could be saved. If you take away God's holy wrath, then there's no longer any need for a Savior and there's no longer any need for Jesus to have died on the cross.

OK. I've talked enough about the wrath of God. I hope that tangent was helpful in alleviating any confusion about God possessing wrath. Let's return to the description of humanity's downward spiral.

Three times in our passage it says, "God gave them over." In verse 24 God gave them over to "*sexual impurity.*" In verse 26 God gave them over to "*shameful lusts.*" In verse 28 God gave them over to "*a depraved mind.*" The original phrase for "gave them over" is intense. It means an active decision, not passive neglect.

Imagine you're walking your dog on a 25-foot leash. While you're walking down the road you see one of your best friends. So you start talking and you're not paying attention to your dog. Your dog is 25 feet away, around a corner, and he's getting himself into trouble. The trouble is caused by your neglect, not an active decision. This is **not** what "gave them over" means.

To illustrate what it does mean, we have to make a few changes to the story. You're still walking your dog down the street on a 25-foot leash. But now your dog is misbehaving badly. Pulling on the leash. Biting the leash. Biting at you. Barking and yelping. Despite all of your attempts to correct him, your dog's horrible behavior continues. Eventually you lean down and unhook your dog's collar from the leash and you "give him over" to his wicked desires.

Some of you might object to this because you love your dog and can't imagine giving them over to danger. Keep in mind this is just an illustration. We're not talking about simple-minded dogs but humanity. It's good to limit the freedoms of simple-minded creatures to protect them. But humans are not simple-minded. We are highly complicated.

Do you really want God to place constant limits on our freedom like we're a dog on a leash? Here's the tension: Nobody wants God to make us robotically obedient. And everyone is uncomfortable with the wickedness we'll choose when God gives us over. When God "gives people over" he withdraws his hand of protection, allowing the consequences of sin to take their destructive course. Paul for sure highlights sexual sins here, but as we will soon see, we all make this list.

The Three Ways God Gave Them Over

In verses 24-25 God gave them over to "sexual impurities." This is the idea that anything goes so long as you are sincere and

non-judgmental. Instead of truth people are asking themselves, "Is this interesting?" For the people in Rome, this could have been sex between masters and slaves or sex at a local shrine, sex with a child, or soldiers raping women in conquered lands. New versions of these old perversions occur today. And we've added a new method to practice sexual impurity: internet pornography. Sexual impurity refers to **any** sexual activity outside of the covenant of marriage.

How else did God give them over? In verse 26 Paul says,

"God gave them over to shameful lusts, exchanging natural sexual relations for unnatural ones."

Paul is clear that homosexuality is the result of people suppressing God's truth and part of the downward spiral of humanity. That makes this passage highly controversial! It's even more heated today in light of the recent Supreme Court ruling that requires every state in the Union to license a same-sex marriage.

Some churches, in an attempt to be more culturally relevant and to seem more loving, have downplayed or denied the clear teaching of Scripture on homosexuality. We might call this the liberal approach. Other churches take what the Bible says about homosexuality very seriously but add a self-righteous attitude. They see homosexuality as **the** sin that matters the most. They don't seek to love or welcome gay people. They might love their neighbor who's addicted to internet porn but not their homosexual neighbor. We might call this the conservative approach.

The Bible is neither and nor is CPC. For about 10 years our church has had a Position Paper posted on our website entitled "Same-Sex Marriage." I'd encourage you to read it and we've got hard copies at the Information Table today. It's thoroughly Biblical and explores all of the detailed nuances of this controversial issue.

Today I'm focusing my comments on homosexuality as being 1 example of 23 examples, of the downward spiral of humanity when people suppress the truth of God. You should know that there are some interpreters that see this passage very differently. They say these verses are referring to abusive homosexuality, not two consenting adults in a monogamous homosexual relationship.

There are some who say Paul's use of "natural" allows for any person to determine what's "natural" for them. In essence, stay true to your personal sexual orientation. If you consider your sexual identity as heterosexual, then engaging in a same-sex relationship is unnatural for you and therefore a sin. And vice-versa.

Neither explanation makes sense. There is no sound logic to the abusive interpretation. The word "natural" refers to God's created design in nature. It's referring to how God created male and female for one another in the Garden. Like all of the other 23 sins listed in these verses, as much as we'd prefer to deny their seriousness or legitimacy, they are undeniable.

At CPC we want to be a place where anyone struggling with same-sex attraction can find a place of faith, hope and love. We believe God wants us to preach the Gospel, to love everyone and it's God's job to convict and change people from the inside out!

Although the clear meaning here is that homosexuality is a sin and an example of the downward spiral humanity travels as it suppresses God's truth, it's not to be put in a category of "the worst sin." As these verses go on, it's quite unsettling because every person sees their own behavior in the following 21 wicked acts.

God gave them over to a depraved mind (v. 28).

Driving the point home that suppressing God's truth is expansive and corrosive, Paul provides 21 more examples of the downward spiral:

- economic disorder (greed)
- social disorder (murder, strife, deceit and malice)
- family breakdown (they disobey their parents)
- relational breakdown (senselessness, faithless, heartless, ruthless)

Then the final characteristic of just how far we've gone down the spiral is seen as we give approval to these wicked acts.

Paul's point is that we become such a twisted mess that we'll never make it on our own. He's driving home the point of how much we need Jesus, like it says in 1:16-17. No one is moral enough. No one is nice enough. We are **all** fighting a great battle against our sinfulness. The Christian doesn't need to fear God's wrath because God's megaphone of love and grace is Jesus and the cross. But if you haven't placed your faith in Jesus, you're fighting alone and facing God's wrath without protection.

Have you placed your faith in him or are you trying to make it on your own? Are you turning to him in faith to find your righteousness or are you propping yourself up on self-righteousness? Let's be a church of humble, gracious truth seekers who celebrate Jesus.

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