

Study in Romans

Doctrine > Bad News

Romans 1:18-3:20

Sinful Man's Ruined and Decaying Relationships

If Romans were pictured as a train, it would ride on the twin rails of God's sovereignty and the Saint's faith. At the heart of the gospel is a righteousness from God that is applied to the believer by faith. That same faith, guided by the Holy Spirit in an on-going, step-by-step fashion, continues to access God's rich, spiritual, temporal blessings.

In chapter 5, the beginning of Paul's enumeration and explanation of the many temporal blessings of life in Christ (chapters 5-8), the very first of these spiritual blessings mentioned is peace with God. But before this can be shown to us in all its glory, Paul shows us the devastating results of sin presented in these first two and a half chapters (basically 1:18-3:20) as a complete breakdown of all relationships: First of man to God, then of man to his neighbor, man to his own body and mind, and finally to creation itself. This is unrighteousness: Man is in an improper and perverted (i.e., twisted, bent so as to be unusable) relation to the Creator/Judge, to his fellow man, to himself and to creation around him. Righteousness is the opposite: A state of "rightness" in all these relationships.

Sinful Man's Unrighteous Relationships

1. To God, his Creator and Judge
2. To fellow man, his neighbor
3. To himself, in body and mind
4. To creation, subjecting it to frustration

Everyone Is Found on the Spectrum of Sin

Paul presents two poles of a spectrum of sin what he calls the Gentile and the Jew. For our understanding of his meaning, we will be using the terms, "hedonist" for the Gentile and "moralist" for the Jew since these terms better capture Paul's meaning in today's understanding. Putting these together, Paul shows us in these two and half chapters that mankind's conflicts, wars, pain, suffering, injustice, insanity, etc., can be traced to the root cause of man's rejection of the truth of God given to him by God for the purpose of knowing Him and relating to Him in a right way. Man has suppressed this truth and God has no choice but to respond with wrath.



Hell Here: The Hedonist and God's Temporal Wrath

In chapter one, the hedonist is presented and God's wrath is being actively seen in this person's life as God lets

them “go to the dogs” as it were. Note Paul’s use of the third person; this is important because most of these people would be seen as “them” to the predominately Jewish audience in the Roman church.

Interestingly, Paul presents a list of sinful behaviors and attitudes (1:29-30), mostly dealing with the extreme cruelty of man to man. But topping the list of the perverted, unrighteous relationships is sexual deviation, notably homosexuality. Paul spends a good bit of time on this particular manifestation of unrighteousness and it seems that this is the most clear and extreme display of the horrible condition of man’s relationships to God, to his neighbor, to his own body and mind, and to creation.

For these people, God’s wrath is presently being poured out in the here and now, hence the term, **temporal wrath**, which we will use in this study. It should be noted that Paul’s presentation of Jesus’ atoning work does not cover this type of wrath. The consequences of sin can still be felt—and hated—by the believer (chapter 7:7-25), but there is no *eternal* condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus in the verse immediately following (8:1). Though never stated expressly in these terms, the implications are quite clear that the believer can now choose to serve God and increasingly experience less temporal wrath and more temporal blessing.

Hell Hereafter: The Moralist and God’s Eternal Wrath

In chapter 2 and part of 3 (vv. 1-8), the moralist is presented. God’s wrath is being stored up as **eternal wrath** for these people. This is not to say that Paul presents the hedonist as exempt from eternal wrath in the life to come, nor that the moralist will never experience temporal wrath in this life. In 3:9-20, he will merge the two into one statement of condemnation for all people who do not seek God, who do not do good, whose mouths are full of poison, whose feet are swift to violence, and who are all under condemnation.

It is noteworthy that Paul spends so much more ink exposing the unrighteous condition of the moralist than he does of the hedonist. This is certainly in keeping with the rest of the New Testament, especially Jesus’ ministry during which He spends so much more time confronting the religious crowd who repeatedly accuses Him of hanging around with “sinners,” i.e., hedonists. Paul could be preaching to his former self, knowing as good or better than any Jew the mind of the moralist from his past life before Christ.

The pitfall for the moralist is that the Law of God, written both on the heart and on the page, truly does have a power to partially restore these devastated relationships and bring temporal blessings as a result. The problem is that when the sinful nature of man comes into contact with the Law, it acts as a neutralizing agent, robbing the Law of its power to completely restore and maintain man’s relationships to his Maker, his neighbor, himself and his world. The moralist is deceived into believing that his outward righteousness is enough when in fact it is actually the worst for its subtly and evil pride. This is the kind of pride that Lucifer fell for and that he continues to whisper into the itching ears of the sinner today who thinks his religion makes him better than his hedonist neighbors.

No One Is Righteous. No, Not Even You.

In 3:9-20, having examined the two general categories of sinners, Paul concludes his exposé of man’s unrighteous condition by bringing together the two ends of the spectrum into one sweeping statement, composed largely of quotes from the Old Testament, that is so severe and unmitigated, it is hard to read without feeling deeply offended, especially since it is being applied to the reader and to those the reader holds dear. Man is in such a bad, horrible, ruined state that all looks to be completely hopeless. He faces a miserable life of Hell here on earth and an even worse eternity of Hell hereafter. Such is the Bad News. THANK GOD that the epistle continues with the Good News starting in 3:21!

But now a righteousness *from God*, apart from law, has been made known, to which the law and prophets testify.
Romans 3:21 NIV