

# Free From Slavery

Message 2

## *God's Righteousness Revealed*

Romans 1:18-32

### ***Introduction***

Have you ever had one of those frustrating conversations where, try as you might, you just never get through? Soon after you begin it becomes evident that you and your conversation partner are missing each other. So you back up and explain what you really meant and the other person agrees with you, but obviously agrees to something you didn't actually say. And the more you try to explain, the more he agrees but misunderstands. It gets maddening! Here you are, two intelligent people speaking the same language, discussing the same topic – yet it feels like two parallel conversations. It would be better if he would just *disagree* with you. Then he might pay attention and hear what you're saying.

Sometimes it's like that when talking with others about God. You use the same words and concepts, but it seems like you don't really connect. You get the idea that he thinks God is more like a super-duper version of Santa Claus, or Saddam Hussein without the weird clothes, or Casper the friendly ghost – than the God of the Bible. Or maybe you have the opposite, yet equally frustrating problem. Your friend understands very clearly how the Bible describes God – but emphatically rejects Him. Recently someone told me that after a long conversation with a friend, he told her, "I don't believe God is like that, but if he is, I want nothing to do with Him!" Such a response leaves you deeply sad – and you wonder how you can ever help him connect with his creator.

Last week we heard Paul declare that God has unleashed a massive power among us – His gospel. Verse 16 says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes." The gospel is the most powerful force in the world – more powerful than our American military, more powerful than George Bush, more influential than George Lucas or Wal-Mart or even Bill Gates! We claim that gospel has an explosive force in the lives of those who hear it. So why does it seem as though so many people succeed in ignoring the gospel? Is the gospel perhaps not so powerful after all? Or are some people effectively inoculated against it? Or are you the problem? Is the delivery vehicle of the gospel flawed or malfunctioning? I have good news tonight. None of these factors significantly impede the gospel. It is doing just what Paul said it will do. Tonight we consider just *how* the gospel works its influence on the people who hear it, and what happens then.

### ***The Unrighteousness of Man***

The first thing we need to notice is the condition of those who hear the gospel. Usually we go through the day attending to our various responsibilities – attending class, doing homework, going to noon prayer, etc. – and we don't think about the core condition of the people around us. The primary reality – the fact which affects *everything* in life, is that people are ungodly and unrighteous. God, who created us, sets the standard of morality – and we don't measure up. What is right and good? The thoughts, feelings, and actions of God. People who live like He does are godly; those who don't are ungodly. God's behavior determines what is right, and those who imitate Him are righteous. The rest of us are unrighteous.

Obviously, God is upset about this. This isn't difficult to understand. If you create something, you expect it to do what you made it for, and if it doesn't, you are displeased. If you write a program and it doesn't run, you fix it until it does, or throw it out and start over. If you set out to write a humorous story, but no one is amused by it, you throw the wretched thing away. If a painting is not looking right, the painter will paint over the canvas and start again. People can't go through life doing whatever they want. It's crazy

to think so! God insists that we live by His rules, and if we don't He will be angry. But tragically, people refuse to obey God. They refuse to live in a godly, righteous manner. Sin is the short word for man's rebellion, and it affects the whole human race.

You know what it's like to have someone extremely angry with you? Well, how do you feel when you are around someone who is even a little angry with you? It's very uncomfortable! Did you ever sneak back into the house after curfew because you didn't want to face your father? If your paper is a week late do you slide it under the professor's door so you won't have to face him? It's absolutely miserable to be with someone who is very angry with you. So how do people go through life in God's world, refusing to live as He requires, facing His anger? This is an impossible situation. No one could last more than a few hours, or maybe a few days at the most. It would drive you *insane* to endure God's constant displeasure. So how do we handle it? We live in denial. In Paul's words, we "suppress the truth". This is the core operation of sin. More fundamental than lying, cheating, or stealing – sin is denying the truth. We know what is true, but we pretend not to. That enables us to get through life psychologically intact (more or less) while disobeying God.

### ***God Reveals His Righteousness***

Now you may be thinking, "Wait a minute! What about those people who don't know about God? What about people who have never read the Bible or heard the gospel? How can people live up to God's righteousness if they don't know what it is? How can they obey God if they don't know who He is? Isn't this an impossible expectation, and isn't God monstrously unfair to be angry with such people? The answer to these questions is that all people *do* know God, because God has shown Himself to everyone. God didn't wait for people to go looking for Him. It doesn't take a philosopher or theologian to find God. It doesn't take intelligence or wealth to know what He is like, because God has shown Himself to *everyone*.

One way we see God is in creation. The world in which we live bears the marks of a divine creator. How could a universe so vast, so beautiful, so intricate come about except through the work of an infinite, good, powerful God? From the beginning of time man has made up alternate explanations, but they never satisfy. The ancient peoples had their creation myths. To us they are pleasant reading, but ridiculous as science. Modern man believes the evolution myth, but someday it will be ridiculed as well. There is only one explanation for creation that makes any sense at all, and that is that an infinite, good, powerful God made it all. Anyone who takes an honest look at creation must come to the same conclusion. Everyone alive has seen the glory of God in the world He has made, and deep down everyone knows God is behind it all.

Another way we see God is in ourselves. All creation reveals God's glory, but man is a special case. You might not know it, judging by some of the ideas in circulation these days – but man alone was made in God's image. When God made the universe, as He was about to make man, He said,

*Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth. Genesis 1:26*

The word "image" had a particular meaning in the ancient world. We think of image mainly as a photographic or digital reproduction. In the ancient world the word image meant more than a physical representation. The ancients had statues, and they knew the difference between an image and a mere statue – and that difference was the presence of the deity. To them, their idols were not useless hunks of stone or gold, but the location of the divine presence. The reason God hated idolatry was that it blasphemously misrepresented His true nature. In fact God Himself had provided a true image – and that was mankind. The

idea here is that when you look at man, you see the nature of God. Of course there are clear differences, too. We aren't infinite, eternal, and all-powerful. But we do have rational, emotional, and spiritual capacities which are entirely unlike anything found elsewhere on earth. In a profound way, we are like God. In fact, we are more like God than we are like the animals! So when we see another person, we are amazed at his or her abilities. Compared to the rest of creation, human beings are literally God-like.

What this means is that no one can escape the revelation of God. Even if you were able to seal yourself up in a chamber and sustain yourself intravenously – if you were able to block out the creation completely – you would still be confronted with irrefutable proof that there is a God. Your own life proclaims that there is a God who is infinite and good, who made you and will judge you.

You see, every day of your life, every hour, every second of the day you are bombarded with the message that God made you, rules you, and judges you. You know this, and you know that God's anger is justifiably aroused by your evil refusal to obey Him. You know there is a final confrontation coming, and you are terrified. You can't live with this thought. It's too horrible to bear. You have to find a way to shut off the voice of God, but you can't – so you do the next best thing. You muffle it. You try to drown it out with other voices, with the noise of human society. But you still hear it seeping through. Sometimes someone comes in and turns up the volume. He tells you about the God you deny. You do your best to get rid of him. If you live in a culture where it is possible to do so, you punish him for ruining your day. If it gets too bad, you might have to kill him. But still the voice comes through. On good days you muffle it enough that you can actually enjoy life.

Did you ever bob for apples? It's a common Halloween party game. You fill a tub with water and float apples on it. Then you see who can get an apple simply by biting it. The wet apples are slippery and you inevitably get at least your face wet trying to grab an apple. But suppose you tried to keep all those apples under water simultaneously. You might be able to keep two or three, but when you went for others, the first would bob up to the surface. That's how it is for unbelievers. They can't bear to think about God, so they suppress the evidence of His presence. But as soon as they get one thing under control, God speaks from some other direction. Day by day, they live in constant tension – trying to shut out the voice, and never totally succeeding. It's enough to push you to the edge, and some people find final relief by extinguishing all capacity to hear God's voice – they kill themselves.

So what is happening when you tell someone the gospel and they yawn, or leave, or reject what you say? Has the gospel lost its power? No way! It is doing its work. What you are seeing is various coping mechanisms to deal with the presence of God. You are seeing the result of a lifetime of carefully constructed protections to keep that terrifying voice at bay. No, the gospel is having its effect all right – and if you keep at it, eventually those defenses will be torn away and your friend will embrace God – only to find that the God he feared for so long is a God who loved him all the while.

### ***The Progress of Sin***

Paul continues by explaining how sin works in the lives of those who do not believe the gospel. They reject God, and their core sin is unworshipfulness and ungratefulness. Verse 21 says, "although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful." This shows us that worship and thanksgiving are the two basic responses to God. More fundamental than anything else, we must be people who worship God for His glory and thank Him for His blessings. If we fail here, we have missed the most elementary aspect of following God. This helps us to see why joining God's people in church on Sunday for worship and thanksgiving is the most basic part of being a Christian.

What happens to those who don't worship and thank God? Three things happen. First, they become unable to think clearly. This is what theologians call the noetic effect of sin, after the word  $\nu\omicron\epsilon\omega$ , meaning "to understand". Sins affect more than your moral condition. It permeated your whole being. As sin progresses, it progressively corrupts you ability to think. You don't realize this is happening, of course. Now I don't mean to say that long-term sinners become ignorant, or that they can't do astonishing research. They can cultivate and develop their thinking abilities in certain areas, but their ability to think clearly in other areas breaks down over time.

Second, they become corrupt emotionally. In Paul's words, their hearts were darkened. Little by little they begin to enjoy things that are inherently ugly and despicable, and hate things that are good and noble.

Finally, they become fools.

In the rest of this chapter Paul sketches out the further progress of sin as it works its way through a person's life. He begins by refusing to worship or thank God, which impairs his thinking ability and corrupts his emotions. He proceeds to idolatry – replacing an unacceptable God with one of his own liking, one he can control, one who will approve of his behavior, one who will not make such high demands on him. This moves him on to step three – sexual immorality. Refusing to worship God, man worships himself – his own body. He serves its desires and he becomes enslaved to it. He also worships the bodies of other people, but in his lust for them, he dishonors and degrades them.

step 4 – homosexuality

step 5 – horrible perversions

effects on the whole culture

consequences of sin – wrath, death

gospel – salvation all through

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