

## Romans 1:18-32 The consequences of violating God's boundaries

### Introduction

Paul has begun his letter to the church at Rome with a passionate expression of his commitment to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It is something he has given his whole life to proclaim. The pinnacle of Romans 1 is verses 16 and 17 –which are a real joy to read and to reflect on. But, there is a huge problem because many people are not interested in the good news offered to them. They are happy living life without God and have no interest in the message we want to share with them. This was a big issue in cities like Rome, Athens or Corinth in Paul's day –just as much as in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain. Fast forward to the present day, we have the answer to humanity's biggest need, but a large proportion of the people we want to reach have no conception of their need of Christ. This is the biggest obstacle to people coming to Christ, their inability to sense a need of Him as Lord and Saviour. With any kind of problem a person must admit their situation before they can receive the help required to address their particular issue. The first of the twelve step's of Alcoholics Anonymous states: 'We admitted we were powerless over alcohol –that our lives had become unmanageable.' The sad reality for many people under the grip of addictions of various kinds is their unwillingness to face up to what is really going on. Interestingly, AA steps two to six include recognition of the need for divine assistance to overcome the addictive substance or behaviour.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. [Alcoholics Anonymous (June 2001). "[Chapter 5: How It Works](#)"]

Recognising the problem of sin in our lives is as important as an addict seeing what is damaging their quality of life and probably that of their family and friends as well. Paul will portray for the Church in Rome a glimpse of their own society at the heart of the empire, with all its idolatry, immorality and antisocial behaviour. The Gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul is convinced, is the only hope for the transformation of that society, and ours. He begins in Romans 1:18 by stating the heart of the problem.

### 1. The Heart of the Problem (Romans 1:18)

<sup>18</sup> [**For**] *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness*, Paul's letter to the Romans is a very logical treatise carefully planned out with a clear progression of thought. Unfortunately the NIV has chosen here and in a few other places not to include the 'link' word *for* which makes this clearer.

(a)What is the wrath of God? This biblical truth has often been misunderstood or misrepresented by many writers and thinkers. First of all it must be made plain that it is not God being angry like humans getting angry in a variety of circumstances in daily life. We have to admit that there are times when not getting angry would be wrong, because someone else's behaviour is so out of order that toleration or acceptance of it would be morally impossible. Yet there are other times when our anger is unjustified and we need to apologise. Nor can we allow the claims of others that this is purely metaphorical language because, they claim, 'God cannot or does not express emotions like human beings'. Proponents of this viewpoint argue that Paul, and other biblical writers, are simply pointing to the cause and effect of wrongdoing. Criminals are usually caught and punished –at least eventually, for example. In a world of good and evil, right and wrong, God cannot take a stance of moral neutrality. His 'wrath' is His consistent holy hostility to evil, and His unwillingness to

accommodate it or tolerate it in the universe He has created. It must, therefore, be judged by Him. This is the fundamental difference we have with ardent atheists like Richard Dawkins who deny the existence of categories of 'good' and 'evil'. They make such a claim, correctly from their point of view, because to use this moral terminology is to accept God as the ultimate authority who determines what is 'good' and what is 'evil'. When put on the spot only a tiny proportion of people in Britain would agree with them, as almost everyone knows in their heart that certain behavioural choices are 'good' and others are certainly 'evil'. The 'problem of evil' is only a problem for people who believe in the one true God who is both all powerful and all-good. On a superficial level the new atheists appear convincing and cogent in their claims, because they shout them loudly in the public square, but a closer inspection reveals fundamental flaws in their arguments that undermine their case.

(b) **What is this wrath revealed against?** (i) The fundamental issue *godlessness* We may get angry when our pride has taken a hit! But there is no personal retributive aspect to God's anger. He has an in principle settled conviction against evil in all its forms and on a consistent basis. Paul writes in Romans 1:18: [*For*] *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people...* The key to it here that is the basis of all evil is *godlessness*. It can appear in apparently minor forms, for example, in the published version of Liberal Democrat leader and atheist Nick Clegg's recent speech on the subject of 'Gay Marriage'. The copy of the speech released to journalists included these words: Continued trouble in the economy gives the bigots a stick to beat us with, as they demand we 'postpone' the equalities agenda in order to deal with 'the things people really care about.'" [BBC News website 11 Sept, 2012] 'The bigots' he had in mind were people of faith and other people who held to traditional moral views. Modifying his speech by the time of delivery did not hide his underlying antipathy for biblical moral standards. The foundational sin in this world is to seek to remove God or to determine to live as if He did not exist. Paul in Romans 3:18 states: *There is no fear of God before their eyes*. It is a reference to David's words in Psalm 36:1: *I have a message from God in my heart concerning the sinfulness of the wicked: There is **no fear of God** before their eyes*. The opposite is equally true. 'The essence of goodness is godliness, to love Him with all our being and to obey Him with joy'. (John Stott, *Romans*, p. 72) It is a challenge to all of us as Christians: is my love for God sufficiently strong so that it influences my patterns of thought, the words I choose to speak and the way I behave? Have I ever taken the step of committing my life to God as Lord of my life, or have I been going my own way and failed to follow Him? The apostle lists two categories of wrongdoing here *godlessness*- that which is 'against God' and *wickedness* -that which is 'against other people'. Paul will expand this point as this chapter unfolds. (ii) A serious charge who suppress the truth by their wickedness (Romans 1:18b) This is a serious accusation. Many authors have commentated that children have no difficulty with grasping the idea of God as creator and sovereign over the world. It makes sense to them. Only when they get older do the difficulties arise -in connection with the formulation of alternative world views. In addition, many atheists will openly admit that the world looks as if it was designed. There is no known planet in the Universe with the advantageous conditions for life like planet earth. It looks as if it was designed as does my car and yours too! This is because a reasonable interpreter of the evidence could be expected to reach that conclusion. Harvard geneticist Richard Lewontin, a prominent atheist, wrote: 'we take the side of science in spite of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs...because we have a prior commitment to materialism... moreover that materialism is absolute for we cannot allow a Divine foot in the door.' [Richard Lewontin, *New York Review of Books*, 9 January 1997][Definition of materialism: The theory that matter and energy are the only objects existing within the universe, and that mental and spiritual phenomena are explainable as functions of the nervous system of people] There is a problem with his line of reasoning on a number of levels -for starters confusing science with a prior commitment to atheism is illogical; then 'we cannot allow' reference to

God –since when were atheists made the moral arbitrators policing the rest of society, apart from in places like North Korea? John Lennox’s brilliant little booklet ‘*God and Stephen Hawking: Whose design is it anyway*’ (Lion Hudson 2010), provides a delightful response to such faulty thinking. Paul’s charge is that many unbelievers choose to reject belief in God, despite evidence that points to His activity in the world and the Universe. It is an inconvenient truth for them. The challenge to us as Christians is to model our lives in such a way that other people can see the reality of God’s love and grace in our lives which will attract people who are searching for meaning and purpose in their lives.

(c) **How is this wrath revealed in people’s lives?** The obvious answer is final judgement. In Paul’s words in Romans 2:5-6: *...you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when His righteous judgement will be revealed. God will give to each person according to what he has done.* In his first lesson to the Church in Thessalonica, the apostle told them that salvation through Jesus had saved them *from the coming wrath* (I Thessalonians 1:10). There is also judgement in this life which in some cases is carried out through the justice system which is *God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer* (Romans 13:4). Paul will address this issue later in this letter. However, there is also a third form of wrath which is explained in the next section of Romans chapter one. Here it operates not by God’s direct intervention, but on the contrary, by His willingness to allow sinful people to choose to go their own way, in direct contravention of His moral law.

Paul has stated the problem here very simply and clearly and the issues he raises about the cultural context of his day are remarkably similar to those of our own day.

## 2. **The inexcusability of humanity’s rejection of God** (Romans 1:19-20)

(a) **God has revealed Himself in creation** (Romans 1:19-20a) <sup>19</sup> *since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.* <sup>20</sup> *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...* The supreme revelation of God is in the person of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:3 declares of Jesus: *The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being...* However, in addition to the special revelation in Him, Christians have historically believed in some version of what we call general revelation. That is, that in the creation we see something of God’s handiwork. Psalm 8 includes these words: *Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth! You have set your glory in the heavens... When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have set in place, <sup>4</sup>what is mankind that You are mindful of them, human beings that You care for them?* (Psalm 8:1, 3-4); Psalm 19:1 simply states: *The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands.* After a declaration of some new finding about the origins of the Universe to the American Physical Society in April 1992, an anonymous *Guardian* contributor wrote: It is difficult to know what the appropriate reaction to such mind-expanding discoveries should be, except to get down on one’s knees in total humility and give thanks to God or Big Bang or both, for cunningly contriving to allow this infinitesimal part of the Universe called Earth to be bestowed with something called Air’. John Stott recalled a letter from a consultant surgeon that made this same point. He wrote: ‘I am filled with the same awe and humility when I contemplate something of what goes on in a single cell as when I contemplate the sky on a clear night. The coordination of the complex activities of the cell in a common purpose hits the scientific part of me as the best evidence for an Ultimate Purpose.’ (both examples from Stott, *Romans*, p.74) Therefore, Paul declares:

(b) **People are without excuse** (Romans 1:20b) *so that people are without excuse.* In other words Paul is saying that human beings can see God’s power, deity and glory through the created order. However, this knowledge falls short of His fuller revelation in Jesus which is necessary to lead us to salvation and the reception of His glorious grace. The evidence that is before us is sufficient to make any reasonable person stop and think that there has to be design and a purpose to this world. In the light of this information Paul says people should

take note of God and His plans and purposes for our lives, as revealed in the Scriptures. Have you committed your life to God through Jesus? There is no other way to receive His gift of salvation.

### 3. The consequences of humanity's rejection of God (Romans 1:21-32)

(a) The nature of sin (Romans 1:21-23) (i) Sin is conscious rebellion against God <sup>21</sup> *For although they knew God, they neither glorified Him as God nor gave thanks to Him...* The act of sinning is an outward manifestation of a prior act of rebellion against God. In essence it can be viewed as an act of idolatry in that something or someone has a higher claim on our allegiance than God. It is the placing of oneself on the throne without regard for God [or for the welfare of other people]. I decide, it is my choice alone and no-one will tell me what to do! The problem with this kind of thinking is that it often affects other people not just the person making the choice. Someone drinking and driving or driving recklessly, for example, could kill a family in another car or the impact of a crash could result in life-changing injuries for another person. A person who leaves a spouse and children because they have 'fallen in love' with someone else, who may also have similar relationship issues, has made a decision that affects an increasing amount of other people impacted by its implications. God, seeing the bigger picture, wants the best for each of His children, but only seeing part of the picture we can potentially make serious errors of judgement by ignoring God's guidance for our conduct.

(ii) To sin is a deliberate decision *but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.* James 1:13-15 articulates this process in a helpful way. *When tempted, no one should say, 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone; <sup>14</sup> but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. <sup>15</sup> Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.* The act of sinning is the end result of a process that James has articulated using the image of the conception development in the womb and birth of a child. For example, an armed robbery at a jewellers shop, most probably begins with a visit to the premises to ascertain whether there are the kind of items that could be quickly sold to less legitimate members of that profession. Issues of access to premises; the necessity for obtaining getaway vehicles and easy access to major roads or the motorway network ensure a plan of action is not created in a single day. Addictions rarely begin with the first drink or pill or viewing of unsuitable images on the computer. However, a pattern of behaviour emerges that feeds the interest, which becomes a habit, which in time may get to a point where an individual loses the ability to control their lives. At that point outside assistance by family or friends or a professional agency may be required to get them back on track. Liberation will only come, though, if that person corrects the wrong choices they have been making.

(iii) To sin is an act of folly <sup>22</sup> *Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.* Idolatry would be much simpler to resist if it was only an issue of bowing down to carved representations of gods of various religions. There are many passages in the Bible that critique that form of behaviour. But idolatry is putting something else in the place of God in our affections. In our Western secular society, wealth, power or fame are amongst the most significant idols; In pursuit of wealth one third of the population will voluntarily hand over a pound or much more in a voluntary donation to the Government each week in the hope that they can overcome the 1:14, 000,000 odds of winning the national lottery; how many politicians at national level, I wonder, are motivated more by power than public service? Only God knows the answer, but I fear too many at the present time; yet it is not only in particular sectors of society, the desire to control other peoples lives in an unhelpful way is an issue, for example, in management in companies and also in trades union ranks;

fame- what some people will do for their few minutes of exposure to the centre stage, but when millions of others would happily do the same, given the opportunity, it speaks volumes about the soul of our nation and the loss of a sense of purpose in life for a high proportion of our society. As Christians we have a message people need to hear, to help them find out why they are alive and the purpose and plan God has for their lives. But what happens when people consciously and wilfully reject the voice of God in their conscience and minds and choose to live in a way opposed to His standards?

(b) **The seriousness of sin** (Romans 1:24-27) <sup>24</sup>Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. <sup>25</sup>They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is for ever praised. Amen. Idolatry unchecked inevitably leads to immorality of one kind or another because not only is our relationship with God distorted or denied, our view of and relationships with other people can also be damaged. Regular users of pornography consciously or unconsciously adopt an unrealistic view of the same or opposite gender and foster a false understanding of sexual intimacy. Evidence from an increasing number of studies reveals the damage done through pornography leads to increased sexual and physical violence and growing alienation between couples. The statistics are sobering. Approximately 20% of women and 30-35% of men on a weekly basis are viewing for pleasure serious pornographic images and anecdotal evidence from Evangelical Alliance surveys implies that this problem is increasingly surfacing in Christian congregations too. Computers and the internet are great tools, but like everything else can be used in harmful ways. The anonymity of the internet has allowed access to materials once found only in dodgy backstreet shops, or the forming of relationships that once would have been impossible through the usual forms of communication. There are no simple answers to this problem, but as Christian Churches we cannot bury our heads in the sand and pretend that this problem of epidemic proportions in the wider population will not be an issue for us to address. Not least if we hope to see people converted from unchurched backgrounds, there is always the possibility of engagement with some people who have been damaged in this way.

From addressing the general principle of the dangers of sexual immorality the apostle briefly addresses two specific examples of inappropriate conduct that was extremely common in Roman society 2,000 years ago, namely lesbian and homosexual relationships. Despite the saturation coverage of gay rights in Britain only around 1% of the population are consistently practising homosexuals with 4-5% of others more properly identified as bisexuals. Despite the claims of homosexual lobbying organisations their numbers are nowhere near the 10% of the population repeatedly claimed by their spokespeople. In Romans 1:26-27 Paul writes: <sup>26</sup>Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. <sup>27</sup>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. The public debate for years has centred on what is 'natural'; many years ago Matthew Paris, the well-known political columnist and homosexual activist, wrote a very helpful article I think in *The Times* newspaper in which he explained that for over 90% of practising homosexuals, including himself, a gay lifestyle was a matter of personal choice. It was not 'the way they were born'. [I am aware that a very small percentage of people have genetic or psychological issues that sadly cause their lives to be seriously damaged and difficult in terms of their sexuality and gender identity and for such people we can only have the deepest sympathy, but thankfully this group in numerical terms is very small, but tragic for the individuals concerned and their families] Now it is important to say that the development of human sexuality is incredibly complex and no-one has so far been able to explain comprehensively (in medical terms – leaving out moral issues) why some people with very similar backgrounds choose a homosexual lifestyle rather than a

heterosexual one. I suspect there are many contributing factors including relations with parents and other adults in healthy or abusive environments that lead to the development of a homosexual or heterosexual orientation in adult life. Recognising the reality of an orientation does not automatically lead to inappropriate conduct. God for our good has given clear guidance from Genesis two onwards that the full expression of sexual relations must be confined within the boundaries of heterosexual marriage, the most appropriate context for the procreation and nurturing of children. What our society fails to value is the significance of good platonic friendships and what churches have also often failed to recognise is the appropriate valuing of single people in its ranks as much as 'families'; the obsession with 'gay-marriage' amongst the political classes in Edinburgh and London is as a result of loosing a moral compass and being guided by political expediency. The Church of Jesus Christ and the large majority of others in our society who value marriage have to stand firm for our principles so clearly based on God's Word.

(c) **The consequences of sin** (Romans 1:28-32) <sup>28</sup> Furthermore, just as they did not think it worth while 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. <sup>29</sup> 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, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; <sup>31</sup> they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. <sup>32</sup> 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 practise them. Idolatry leads not only to immorality but a whole series of other anti-social vices that if unchecked will destroy the fabric of society. Paul's list in Romans 1:28-32 is sobering and as accurate today as it was when first penned. God knows what is best for us and wants to spare His creatures the pain and heartaches that can result from living life outside His principles for human conduct.

#### **4. Pastoral implications in daily living**

I want to turn briefly and last to a pastoral application. How do we react in our family circle when a member chooses a lifestyle so at variance with God's plans for their lives? All the examples Paul gives here affect Christian families as well as those with no church connections. Every minister will have conversations with heartbroken parents and grandparents. First of all please don't close the door on communications, pretending the individual concerned has left your life or that their behavioural choice hasn't happened. Games of pretence are for children not adults. Secondly please be patient and pray. The values inculcated in earlier years can come to the fore later and opportunities to speak and guide can arise when relationships have been maintained. Thirdly although in some cases there is no reformation as far as we can tell, there are others that can have a longer term happier outcome. There are people who have entered homosexual or lesbian partnerships that years later come to see the mistakes they have made. I had the joy of speaking to a Christian parent in another congregation whose child after many years rebuilt their life and continues on that pathway. In their church no-one else knows the heartache that has been prayed over for many years. Others continue with the heartaches with no resolution yet in sight, but we serve a great God into whose hands we commit our families. Never give up hope, be gracious and patient and having done what we can, commit people into God's hands who can do more than we may *ask or imagine* (Ephesians 3:20), Amen.