



Pagans Need the Gospel

Lesson 2 | Romans 1:18-32

Darla is your typical unchurched American. She fought with her parents as a kid (and as an adult). She gossips about coworkers and wishes she could make more money and have nicer things. She's lied, sometimes to get out of a commitment she made. She has people she does not like, people she argues with whenever she's around them. Darla isn't uniquely evil. She's never killed anyone, and she is generally a nice person and does an okay job at work. Darla is in many ways your typical everyday unbeliever.

What does God think of Darla? Well, according to Romans she has a "reprobate mind" as evidenced by her being "disobedient to parents," a "whisperer [gossip]," a "covenantbreaker," and the fact that she is "full of envy... debate [strife], deceit." Because of this, God's wrath against her has been revealed. That seems awfully intense to most people. God is angry over a bunch of seemingly small sins? For God to be angry with Hitler or mass murders or rapists we can accept. But why would he be so upset with Darla?

Why do you think God is angry with sins that from our perspective seem so small?

The reason we struggle with God's anger against all sin is because we fail to see sin for what it really is. After proclaiming that God's righteousness has been revealed in the gospel (1:17), Paul tells us that the wrath of God against sin has been revealed (1:18) and the rest of the chapter explains why God is so very angry against sin. This passage shows us that at the heart of sin is a rejection of God and God's truth, and because man rejects God, God judges man.

Man's Rejection of God (1:19-23)

Perhaps you've heard the question, "What about the native in Africa who has never heard of Jesus? Will he be condemned for not accepting Christ?" The answer is no, he will not be condemned for accepting a Christ he has never known. But he will be condemned for rejecting a God he does know. God's anger with unbelievers is justified, even when His anger is directed at those who have never heard His Word. This is because everyone knows God and everyone rejects God.

Man Knows God (1:19-20)

Everyone has some knowledge of God. Even the illiterate caveman or jungle native has access to truth about who God is through creation. God has made sure that every person who has ever lived can see that there is a Creator because they can see what He created.

What kinds of things can people know about God by simply looking at creation?

What kinds of things can people not know about God by simply looking at creation?

This passage gives two clear examples of what we can know about the invisible God from His visible creation at the end of verse 20.

What are they?

God's eternal power and His divinity are clearly seen by the created world. In other words, people can look at the sun, moon, stars, the complexity of biodiversity and the intricacy of DNA, and they can see that there is a God who is very powerful. Such evidence is sufficient that there is an almighty Creator behind everything we see. As Psalm 19 puts it, day and night there is a universal language being spoken by the creation, and with that language it is shouting the glory and majesty of God (Psalm 19:1-2).

If the Bible claims that everyone has sufficient evidence to believe in God, why do some people claim there isn't enough evidence?

Man Rejects God (1:21, 25)

But knowing about God isn't enough. What is done with that knowledge? According to Paul, not only does everyone know God, but everyone rejects Him, too. That rejection takes two forms: a failure to worship God and a failure to be thankful to Him.

- **Man rejects God by failing to worship Him**

Paul first teaches that when people knew God they did not glorify Him as God. When they saw the beauty and wonder and splendor of creation, they worshipped the creation rather than God. Specifically, verse 25 tells us they changed (or exchanged) the truth about God for a lie. The result of this exchange was that rather than worshipping God, they worshipped idols.

Why would man choose to worship idols rather than their Creator? What is their appeal to our sinful heart?

But what about us, who have "pagan" neighbors that no longer bow down to idols of stone or wood? Even if people don't worship statues, man still takes the worship due to God and gives it to something in the creation instead. Rather than love and cherish and sing the praises of God, people give their hearts to something God has made instead. One theologian described idolatry as "the de-godding of God." God's unique place as the Creator is diminished. The glory and praise and honor that He is owed is given to something lesser, something He made. People today may not worship literal idols, but we still have major worship problems.

What does it mean to worship?

What would it look like for believers to give their worship to something else?

- **Man rejects God by failing to be thankful to Him**

Too often we fail to understand what a deadly sin it is to have an unthankful heart. Unbelievers go after idols because they aren't thankful for what God has given them. Greed leads to a wandering heart and corrupted worship.

Why do you think the connection is between a lack of gratitude and the wrong kind of worship?

How can we as believers cultivate a heart of gratitude to avoid falling into the spiral of idolatry?

The core of man's rejection of God has been the same since the garden. God reveals Himself to man, but man does not worship God properly and is unthankful. Adam and Eve chose to disobey God and were not thankful for the bountiful feast He had given them. Every sin since then has on one level or another followed the same path of ingratitude and idolatry.

Man Becomes a Fool (1:22-23)

If you set out to solve a problem, but before you even begin you reject the only solution, you're doomed to failure. When the most brilliant people on earth set out to explain life, but before they begin they reject God, all of their solutions will be foolish. Their ideas might sound good to them and their friends, and they may even feel very proud of what they think, but that won't change the fact that they will be fools.

How is it that people who reject God can do so much good for humanity, for example by inventing new cures or making discoveries that greatly help people? How can we call such people fools?

In what ways has the wisdom of the world led to great foolishness throughout history?

How is the wisdom of the world leading people to great foolishness today?

People who reject God may get Ph.D.'s. They may be brilliant astrophysicists, or highly decorated generals capable of leading an army several million strong into battle. But if they reject God, they are fools because they have missed what life is all about. They refuse to accept the most important truth and in the universe and instead have willingly swapped the truth for a crude lie.

God's Judgment of Man (1:24-32)

Man's rejection of God leads to the outpouring of God's wrath. One of the ways God's wrath is poured out on man is by the chilling phrase He "gave them up" or "delivered them over." Three times in this short section we read that God allows people to face the consequences of their own decisions (1:24, 26, 28). The paraphrase in the Message does a good job of capturing what Paul is saying here: "So God said, in effect, 'If that's what you want, that's what you get'... Since they didn't bother to acknowledge God, God quit bothering them and let them run loose." God sends judgment by letting people have their own way, and when that happens nothing but misery and death will follow.

God Gave Man up to Dishonorable Behavior (1:24-25)

Paul begins by talking about the sinful behavior of these pagans. He uses the terms "uncleanness" and "dishonor" to describe the actions of those without God. Sin is first "unclean," a term often used for sexual sins that describes well the moral filth that comes from rejecting God's law. He then describes the actions of those engaging in such wrong behavior as "dishonoring their bodies." Such sins are not only gross, they degrade the dignity of those who commit them.

How does sin degrade humanity?

He then ties this defiling and degrading activity back to idolatry. When this passage says that man "changed the truth of God into a lie," it could also be translated as "exchanged the truth of God for a lie."

Rather than worshipping Creator, these men and women have worshiped the creature. God made man to rule over the animals and to worship Him, instead man chooses to worship animals and ignore God.

In what ways do people today still “worship and serve the creature [creation] more than the Creator”?

God Gave Man up to Disgusting Desires (1:26-27)

Paul alluded to immorality when he talked about pagans dishonoring their bodies, but now focuses specifically on the sin of homosexuality. This is not because homosexuality is the worst of all sins or totally unforgiveable. It’s not (cf 1 Corinthians 6:9-11). Rather, Paul is using homosexuality as a particularly strong example of what all sin is – a perversion of our natural desires away from God’s will expressed in creation. Both homosexuality and idolatry uniquely display the twisted exchange that lies at the heart of all sin. God created man to rule over the animal kingdom (Genesis 1:26-28), but now idolatrous man makes statues of those and worships them. God created men and women to fit together in a spiritual and physical union, but lust takes humanity so far away from that good plan that men and women reject the abundantly clear pattern hardwired into their bodies. Our sinful desires, when we let them go, will inevitably lead to a complete distortion of the good creation God made.

Paul is using these two sins as vivid examples, but in what ways are all sins a perversion – a twisting and distorting – of God’s creation?

God Gave Man up to Debased Thinking (1:28-32)

Paul warns that those with dishonorable behavior and disgusting desires have a deeper problem: wrong thinking. He describes these people as having a “reprobate mind.” We might hear that word and think of deviants or people who belong in prison. But Paul makes clear for us what he has in mind, and it’s a long list of sins that is very sobering. Not just because these sins are so serious, but because some of them are very common, and most people don’t see them as serious at all.

The list includes: “Being filled with all unrighteousness, fornication [sexual immorality], wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness [evil]; full of envy, murder, debate [arguing, strife], deceit [lying], malignity [wanting bad things to happen to others]; whisperers [gossips], backbiters, haters of God, spiteful [insolent, arrogantly rude], proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, without understanding, covenantbreakers [people who go back on their word], without natural affection [heartless], implacable [unwilling to be at peace], unmerciful”

What are some of the major themes you see in this list?

What you think and what you want will determine how you act. In this section, God warns that because people have thought wrongly, He will give them up to the wrong desires that flow from that thinking. And when people think wrongly and want wrongly, they will act wrongly. As Christians, we must realize that our wrong actions begin with thinking the wrong things and loving or desiring the wrong things.

We often focus on wrong behavior. What would it look like if we spent more time focusing on wrong thinking and wrong wanting?

We began by talking about Darla, a relatively “normal” unbeliever. On the surface, her sins don’t look that bad, especially compared to some of her neighbors (and, well, Hitler). But what we see is not what God sees. God sees someone who has rejected the testimony creation is shouting. He sees someone who refuses to give Him the glory and the thanks He deserves for all the good things He has done. He sees someone with corrupted behavior, desires, and thinking. He sees a rebel. Apart from God’s intervention, this is that state of all humanity. Deceived, deceiving, breaking God’s laws and rejoicing in it. God’s wrath is righteously revealed against all who reject His truth.

How would you respond if you shared the gospel with an unbeliever and they weren’t that bothered by their sin?