

Romans 1 and Homosexuality**by Rev. Philip Keevil (First Presbyterian Church , Reading PA)**

Our text opens a most important section in Paul's letter to the Romans. His concern is singular. Having given us the doctrine in vv. 16 & 17, Paul is now going to show why this gospel is needed in the first place. Why do we need a salvation? Why do we need the power of God? Above all, why has it been necessary for God to reveal a righteousness that comes through the instrumentality of faith alone?

This long section, extending from 1:18-3:20, seeks to answer these questions. Paul knew that simply preaching this gospel was not enough. Men and women, especially today, do not know what is wrong with them. We live in a culture that has abolished sin by calling it something else. Men and women will never repent of their sins, and they will never turn to God for this gift of righteousness by faith, if they do not know their need of it.

This righteousness has had to be revealed, says Paul, because the wrath of God has been revealed. That gets us right into one of the most unpopular doctrines of our times. Paul begins with it, we must also begin with it. It is, in fact, the first principle. Unless we understand our plight and our position before God we will never understand the cross, we will never understand salvation, we will never understand why the world is in the predicament it is in. One of the greatest dangers to the Christian Church today, is a distorted doctrine of God. There are basically two extremes, and they're both distortions. One the one hand, there are those who preach nothing but the wrath of God. They not only start with it, they finish with it. It is everything for them. To emphasize the wrath of God at the expense of the love of God is a distortion of God. But, conversely, to emphasize God's love in a way and in a manner that eclipses His wrath is equally distorted. The Bible does not choose between God's holiness and God's love. It affirms both.

So, the first thing to say is this: The wrath of God is an attribute of God. It is a part of who God is. Second, the wrath of God can be viewed as the flip-side of the love of God. This may be difficult to understand, but it is really quite simple. There is a human anger that is clearly sinful. Selfish rage is one of the deadly consequences of the fall. But, there is another kind of anger. It is the anger of a parent whose child is violated. It is the righteous indignation of a wronged people. It is the anger of justice.

What kind of love would suffer the outrage of a violation without feeling or without indignation? I put it to you that a God without wrath is a God without love! A God who does not hate sin does not love sinners; a God who cannot be angry cannot love! His is the wrath of a loving parent, who cares too much about the human condition to stand by in silent, detached objectivity as though sin did not matter.

The wrath of God presents Him as the high and exalted one, who cannot look upon sin, who must turn away his face from it, in utter revulsion, and, who cannot commune or co-habit with the unholy or the profane. This is the God with whom we have to do. This is the doctrine Jonathan Edwards preached in that most famous of all sermons, Sinners in the hands of an angry God. And it is a doctrine Christians must recover.

Paul says this wrath of God has been revealed from heaven. In other words, a cursory glance at the history of God's dealings with the world introduces us, immediately, to this doctrine. There's no mistaking it. From Adam in the garden, to the marking of Cain. From Babel's tower to the deluge of Noah. From Sodom and Gomorrah to the destruction of the Canaanites, the wrath of God has been revealed. And then, on a lonely hill outside the city wall a sinless, perfect human writhed in agony beneath a darkened sky, and cried out at the ninth hour, My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me? There on the bronze colored, blood-stained hill of Golgotha the wrath of God was revealed. If you want to know what God thinks about sin, look at the writhing of the one whom Pilate called The Man!

The wrath of God is about what God is against. He has a holy, calculated, passionate, and committed enmity against ungodliness and unrighteousness. The Apostle leaves us in no doubt here. He defines this in the clearest of terms. Ungodliness is described, for us, from vv. 18b-25. I am not going to read the section again, but Paul could well have been describing our modern situation. What he says is this: Human Beings have accepted a way of thinking, which is intellectually foolish. God has revealed evidence of His being and nature in the natural world, and in the human conscience. When Human beings suppress that knowledge, as they consistently do, or turn away from it, they are left in a position in which they cannot live, and are caught in a multitude of intellectual tensions.

Our post-modern world is filled with evidence of this. American culture suffocates in the stench of materialism and hedonism. Because we are made in the image of God we have spiritual hungers that only God can satisfy. But, because post-modern men and women have denied God's reality, at least by implication, they are left to seek meaning elsewhere. There is the strange enigma of naturalists who seek communication with the dead, or men like Ingmar Bergman, who denied the existence of God, only to show a strange, irrational interest in demonology.

Paul, as though speaking to our century, describes a world that worships the creation, while denying the Creator. Consequently, the popular Philosophers live in a universe with no purpose. The result is futile thinking, darkened minds, the embrace of the irrational, and ultimately, utter despair. As Proust said, "The dust of death is upon everything."

The fundamental human problem is ungodliness. Emil Brunner put it like this,

In all religion there is a recollection of the divine truth, which has been lost; in all religion, there is a longing after the divine light and the divine love; but in all religion also there yawns an abyss of demoniac distortion of the truth, and of man's effort to escape from God.

Ungodliness is, in the final analysis, a refusal to acknowledge the reality of God in order to escape from that reality. As J. Rodman Williams puts it, "They no longer wanted to know God lest knowing Him stand in the way of their wickedness."

Consequently, an exchange takes place: They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. This is an exchange of the incorruptible for the corruptible. The essence and fountain of life is abandoned for mere images, fashioned after the likeness of perishable nature. The exquisite chiseling of the human form, which stood on Mar's Hill, the devotion

to power and physical strength, the adoration of Hercules and Zeus, all pointed to this general suppression of the knowledge of the Godhead. And, as if that were not enough, this degradation of the living God descended to lower, more debasing conceptions of His glory.

There is, within fallen humanity, a need to make God tangible, controllable, something to manipulate, something that makes no moral demands on our freedom and autonomy. This is the blatant audacity of the magnificent, sophisticated human that substitutes his own order and creation for that of God. Our major problem is our preoccupation with self, and with things. And idolatry is alive and well in our modern world, not only in the temples of Ishtar, but in the temples of higher learning, where the autonomous human shakes off the rule of God like a man might shake off a troublesome serpent.

Men and women are without God in their thinking, consequently, they are without righteousness in their living. The price of exchanging the truth about God for a lie, and worshiping and serving the creature rather than the Creator, is stated unambiguously in vs. 24, Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity to the dishonoring of their bodies among them. This is the severest judgment possible. To be abandoned to our own selves is to be abandoned to our worst enemy. When God lifts the restraints from a culture the product is utter and complete ruin. As Augustus Strong puts it, "When dynamite goes off, it all goes off: there is no reserve."

You notice how in the midst of this, in vs 25, Paul breaks out in doxology, Who is blessed forever, Amen. There is nothing that more clearly distinguishes the Christian from the non-Christian than his/her attitude toward God. Paul cannot be cavalier about this. As he thinks of this pagan world, and all the idolatry and the spiritual darkness, he is overwhelmed, as we should be, with the transcendence, the majesty, infinity, and holiness of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. One of the chief characteristics of the Christian is that he/she is filled with awe and love and wonder for the true and living God.

I want to ask you this morning, Are you grieved by the way men and women speak about your God? Does the blasphemy, and the ridicule hurt you? Let me put it like this, Are you at least as offended by the blasphemy and the idolatry as the world is by the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ? Who is blessed forever, Amen.

We turn now to this final thing. Paul has hinted at it all through this passage, now he says it explicitly: Ungodliness leads to unrighteousness. And we know the description. He is describing pagan Rome.

It was marked by three things. First, moral decadence. Then, in vv. 28&29, inward or spiritual corruption, such as malice, envy, covetousness. Finally, this leads, in vv. 29b-31 to social chaos, such as slander, arrogance, exploitation, rebellion against authority, ruthless cruelty, heartless greed, and gossip. As Karl Barth puts it, "Chaos has found itself, and anything can happen."

Now, one of the most fascinating and controversial aspects of this is Paul's treatment of homo-sexuality, and the whole question of moral disorder. We live in a generation that is highly resistant to any semblance of moral judgment. Certainly, in our present climate a discussion of the question of sexual preference or orientation would have to be put in the context of absolute tolerance or else it would be

met with great hostility. This, of course, raises the question How does the Church approach matters like this?

This is one of the most important questions of our time. I have no doubt but that the future of so-called main-line Protestantism rests to a large degree on how it answers that question. Some would say the Church must first listen to culture. Social and natural science, psychology, philosophy, these are the voices that speak authoritatively on these kinds of matters. Those who hold this view regard Scripture as culture-bound, and are quite clear in their insistence that the Church must be faithful to its own historical moment. If the facts as we now understand them clash with the world view reflected in Scripture then we must read it in the light of those facts. Others regard Scripture as an interpretive model to read social trends, but not an authoritative one.

Still others read texts like our's this morning and fail to find any rejection of homosexuality in them. They argue that Paul is not indicting homo-sexual practice as such but only sexual promiscuity and exploitation. I really find it very difficult to see how that view can hold up in the light of the very clear language here.

What is certain is that if a general acceptance of the homo-sexual life-style is a sign of enlightened culture, then pagan Rome must have been the most enlightened civilization in human history. In ancient Rome homosexuality was pervasive. It was, by some, considered superior to heterosexuality, largely because it was indulged in by so many of the Greek and Roman gods. It seems to me that the Church must take Paul seriously at this point. If he was inspired in vv. 16 & 17 then he inspired here also. Of course, it must also be careful to grasp precisely what he is saying. On one level he is unambiguous. For him an acceptance of this life-style is one of the chief signs of a perverse and disoriented culture.

Also, Paul does not see homo-sexuality as bringing the wrath of God. He sees it as the result of the wrath of God. This is so very important. For Paul pervasive homo-sexuality is evidence that God has abandoned a civilization, or, if you like, to maintain his category, has left it to itself. Homo-sexuality is not the cause of judgment. It is the result of judgment.

On the other hand, we must add that Paul does not end his description of a ruined society by citing homosexuality, rather he begins with it. In verse 28 he goes on to indict heterosexuals, and shows them to be no less condemned. In other words, those, who might cheer at Paul's indictment of this particular sin need to consider their own sin. What about gossip, envy, greed, malice?

We must emphasize that central to Paul's point is the universality of sin. He is leading to the conclusion, in chapter 3, For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. I believe it is incumbent upon the Church, to reject the changing standards of the world, and, unambiguously to proclaim the revealed Word of God. But, at the same time, we must never sound like we are the righteous preaching to the unrighteous. This was the terrible mistake the Pharisees made. They didn't do certain things so they considered themselves righteous. Its why Jesus said, The one who looks upon a woman with desire is guilty. The Christian preacher is a pardoned sinner, telling other sinners where pardon can be found!

The greatest danger, as Paul will show in chapter 2, is self-righteousness: The most dangerous assumption is that because I am not guilty of this or that kind of sin I am better or more righteous than someone else. Jesus ate and drank with publicans and sinners, he touched the lepers, he associated with the socially unclean, he lived in solidarity with the oppressed. He said to the woman caught in adultery, Neither do I condemn you, go and sin no more. He reserved his anger for the self-righteous Pharisee, and warned that we will be judged by the measure with which we judge others.

The final thing is this. We have in this text what God is against, thank God we also have in this epistle what God is for. We are told in vs. 18 that God is against all ungodliness and unrighteousness, but in 8:31 we read, If God is for us, who can be against us. God is against our ungodly thinking, and our unrighteous living, but He is for us. That's the good news of the gospel. He is so much for us that He sent His only begotten Son to die for us. The reason, in fact, why God is against our ungodliness is because He is for us.

Oh, that we might confront, in a fresh way, our need of that righteousness by faith that makes the unrighteous righteous. Oh, that we might not hide behind self-righteousness or rationalization, but come to the One who became sin that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.