International Bible Lessons Commentary

Romans 1:16-32

New American Standard Bible

International Bible Lessons
Sunday, June 26, 2016

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The International Bible Lesson (Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series) for Sunday, June 26, 2016, is from Romans 1:16-32. [Please Note: Some churches will study fewer verses in this lesson.]

Questions for Discussion and Thinking

Further follow the verse-by-verse International Bible Lesson Commentary. Study Hints for Discussion and Thinking Further discusses Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion: these hints are available on the International Bible Lessons Commentary website along with the International Bible Lesson that you may want to read to your class as part of your Bible study. If you are a Bible student or teacher, you can discuss each week’s commentary and lesson at the International Bible Lesson Forum.

International Bible Lesson Commentary

Romans 1:16-32

(Romans 1:16) For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

In chapter 1:16-17 of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, Paul states the theme of the letter, which he wrote to introduce himself to the Christians in Rome prior to a hopeful visit. Paul gave his reasons for preaching the gospel or “Good News.” First, he was not ashamed of the gospel even though the Jews persecuted him and the Gentiles thought it was foolishness. Second, he was not ashamed because the power of God flows through the gospel whenever it is proclaimed. By the power of God, the gospel message will save everyone who trusts in the facts of the gospel message and Jesus as their Lord and Savior (see also 1 Corinthians 15:1-11). The gospel was preached first to the Jews, many of whom believed and were saved, including the apostles and those to whom they first preached. Then, the gospel was preached to the Gentiles, who composed most of the churches outside of Judea.

(Romans 1:17) For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”
The gospel reveals how God will make the whole world right again by doing all that He wisely can and only what is right. Even now, and since the beginning of time, God does all things right no matter how history may appear to us and in spite of our own troubling experiences. God did right, does right, and will continue to do right through His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, through whom He will make those who have faith in Him right morally, spiritually, and physically eventually for eternity. Those who trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior God will declare and make righteous, and they will live daily with faith in God through Jesus Christ. Because God is gracious, He will do this and more for those who have faith in Jesus Christ from beginning to end.

(Romans 1:18) For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

Paul stated why everyone needs God to make them right by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. In Romans chapter 1, Paul wrote first to and about the Gentiles, to those who did not have the Bible or the written law of God to teach them about God and righteousness. Then, in chapter 2, Paul wrote to the Jews who had the Scriptures and the law of God but did not obey God. To people in both groups, the wrath (the personal, angry, just judgment and punishment) of God was revealed from heaven (the spiritual realm and throne of God), because people in both groups have rejected God and God's law (they became godless) and they have lived according to morally evil standards forbidden by God and nature (they became wicked). Their desires to practice moral and spiritual evil have influenced them to totally ignore and reject the truth. They have restrained the truth from influencing their decisions when they have wanted to do what they knew was wrong. They have twisted the truth and kept it from having any effect on their behavior. They have misled others about the truth and have changed the truth into subtle lies to deceive others and keep them away from God too. In the verses below, Paul will describe how God’s wrath is revealed from heaven.

(Romans 1:19) because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.

God is justified and right to express His wrath (His just punishment on unbelievers who reject God to live godless and wicked lives), because even without the Scriptures unbelievers have had the opportunity to know God exists. If a person has the opportunity to know God exists, he has no excuse for living a godless life that disregards God or seeks to suppress all the truth about God that can be learned from simple observation. The creation points to a Creator and some of the Creator’s attributes; therefore, people have an obligation to obey God and trust in Him up to the level of their understanding without the Bible. Those Paul refers to in these verses had not had the
opportunity to read the Bible.

(Romans 1:20) For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

God is Spirit and is not seen with physical eyes, but the effects of God’s work can be seen in creation and history. From the time of creation, God has revealed His eternal power that keeps all of creation in existence moment by moment and has for eternity past, present, and future. God’s divine nature is also revealed through His benevolence to people and in many other ways. Five hundred years before the coming of Christ, Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle described what they thought about God’s eternal power and divine nature from their observations and speculative thinking. Paul could have used them as examples to prove his point. Though the Bible is needed to correct and explain further their ideas, the writings of Plato and Aristotle illustrate that Paul wrote truly. Because enough about God can be known from observation for people to seek God, those who fight against God and try to suppress what is obviously true about God have no excuse for their wrong attitudes and actions; therefore, unless they repent they are subject to the wrath of God.

(Romans 1:21) For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.

Based on the evidence around them and within them, everyone with the ability to reason has known that God exists; therefore, Paul did not develop a logical argument to prove what people once knew and could know if they sought God and the truth. Instead of continuing to believe in God, glorify God as the Creator, and thank God for their lives in the marvelous world that God created, those who say there is no God and rebel against the God they once knew suffer consequences. First, they lose the ability to reason and their thinking becomes meaningless in the moral and spiritual realms. Second, their hearts (their feelings, emotions, and ability to choose) no longer have the light of understanding to guide them and keep them from error. Because unbelievers restrain the truth from influencing them, they make unreasonable choices and engage in destructive behaviors that believers know are contrary to reason and common sense.

(Romans 1:22) Professing to be wise, they became fools.

Many or most who claim to be atheists (atheists deny God’s existence) or agnostics (agnostics claim they do not have enough evidence to believe God exists or does not exist) have claimed to be wise (far wiser than believers). In their arrogance and pride,
they claim God has not left enough evidence in creation or in the complexity of their own mind and body to believe in God. They judge that God is inadequate, because He has not compelled them to believe in Him with overwhelming evidence. In the process of rejecting God and God’s influence upon them, they become fools and act and think and choose like fools (those with no common sense or understanding). Fools act and talk without reason or an understanding of the consequences of their choices.

(Romans 1:23) and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.

After people in their pride have concluded they are “smarter” than their Creator, Who they judge did not leave them with enough compelling evidence of His existence or is a “bad” God, they turn from worshiping God, to worshiping themselves as wise, and then to worshiping images made with human hands. Paul saw evidence of gross idolatry and immorality wherever he traveled outside of Judea, and we see these man-made gods in museums today or in countries where many still worship idols. Idolatry is a sign of the foolishness that results from denying the Creator exists and refusing to worship God.

(Romans 1:24) Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.

Three times Paul wrote: “God gave them over” or “God gave them up” or “God gave up on them.” Rather than interfere with the choices of those who deny and denounce God, God gives them up or over to do what they want without restraining them (except when He can wisely protect His people from them). God will not turn unbelievers into mindless robots to keep them from doing evil or to keep them from doing what they want to do in their foolishness, godlessness, and wickedness. God protects and restrains true believers from committing many sins, so by God’s grace they do not act as badly as they could or are tempted to act; whereas God gives those who reject Him the opportunity to do the evil they want without restraint except when He can wisely restrain them to protect His faithful ones from evil. Believers grow in their understanding of nature and nature’s God and God’s laws and right choices, whereas unbelievers lose this understanding and act more godless and wicked (as Paul shows).

(Romans 1:25) For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

Paul described in detail how unbelievers decline morally and spiritually with an initial emphasis on the sexual sins which were so prevalent in the Roman world. Many of these
sexual sins were associated with the worship of the idols that we read of thousand years before the coming of Christ in the Old Testament and that were also practiced in the days of the Greeks and Romans before and after the coming of Christ. The devil is a liar and these unbelievers exchanged the truths about God that they knew for lies of the devil, who deceives those who fancy themselves as wise and turn from God. Paul is so disgusted by what he sees around him that he is led by the Spirit to praise his Creator.

(Romans 1:26) For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,

In the midst of writing about the moral and spiritual decline of unbelievers, Paul praised God and relieved his mind and spirit as he wrote about the degradations of those who exchanged the truths about God for lies. Arrogant unbelievers stop thinking and acting naturally as God created them to act and they begin to act unnaturally in their human relationships. Having given up a natural and truthful relationship with God, God gives them up to unnatural and false relationships with others and the idols they worship.

(Romans 1:27) and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

Paul continued to specifically describe how unnatural sin is and how the refusal to repent and return to belief in (and believe the word of) the true God results in even more unnatural behaviors. Unbelievers begin to think that unnatural behaviors are natural, and they use this falsehood to justify their continuing practice of their destructive behaviors. Paul wrote that there is a natural mental and physical penalty that does take place inside of those who persist in practicing unnatural behaviors. Paul described some of the natural penalties in the verses that follow, but there are far more penalties than those revealed by Paul in these verses.

(Romans 1:28) And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper,

People who do not believe in God or believe God will do what He said, and who will even fight with those who believe in and worship the true God, do not (or did not) think it worthwhile to retain what knowledge they had of God. Having made that choice, their mind or thinking abilities and processes become morally and spiritually depraved or degraded in ability and quality. Paul wrote for a third time that God gives unbelievers
over or up to behaving as they want and to suffering the consequences that naturally follow unnatural behaviors – behaviors inconsistent with how God created the human race to act and think. A depraved mind leads people to do what ought not to be done, and when people choose to act unnaturally they will naturally receive the consequences that flow from unnatural behaviors — God does not need to intervene to punish them directly — God gives them up to do what they want, and they suffer the consequences, which might lead them to repent and return to God for salvation (see John 3:16).

(Romans 1:29) being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,

When God gives people up to living in sin, they become involved in many more ways of sinning against themselves and others than what they first began to do. People can read about or watch in movies and television (whether fiction or nonfiction), people displaying all of the many sins Paul listed in his Letter to the Romans. When enough people have been given over to sin by God, a whole culture will become identified by the unnatural acts of the people living there. We know of cities, regions, and countries that have been given over by God to do “every kind of wickedness,” and we see the consequences that can only be reversed by repentance, a return to God, and saving faith in Jesus Christ.

(Romans 1:30) slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,

Among the sinful behaviors Paul listed take special note of “God-haters.” God-haters falsely claim they do not believe in God, and they cause many problems that believers and societies that attempt to honor God suffer. God-haters do actually hate God and those who try to honor and obey God. Notice also “inventors of evil.” With every advancement in technology or in medicine (and in other areas) there are some who will use this new knowledge to invent new ways of doing evil and enticing others to do evil. For example, the Internet can share the gospel around the world and bless millions or the Internet can be misused as something that will tempt people to do many evils in new ways.

(Romans 1:31) without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;

When God gives a person, people, culture, or country over (or gives up on a person, people, culture, or country), the vast majority will be seen to lack understanding in the moral and spiritual realms and in their thoughts and actions. They will not understand right living and thinking and instead they will follow liars and the ways of darkness.
They will do things that believers will not understand because they do these things with no understanding. They will not be trustworthy, loving, or merciful, but without compassion they will invent ways to unreasonably deceive and destroy others.

(Romans 1:32) and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

God gives people a conscience, an inbuilt knowledge of right and wrong that will either commend or condemn their actions both before an act is committed (to restrain someone) and after it is committed or not committed (to condemn or commend someone). The conscience reveals God’s righteous decree; therefore, many harden or suppress their conscience until it will no longer influence or judge their actions and thoughts. Even those without the Bible or the moral law of God know that those who sin as Paul described deserve death, but they refuse to acknowledge that fact. They refuse to repent. Even worse, they approve of others who practice these sins too, and even seek ways to promote the practice of these sins among others, among both believers and unbelievers. Even though God has given unbelievers over to living in sin, God has also sent Jesus Christ into the world to save from a life of sin those who will believe in Him and to give them the free gift of eternal life. Paul will describe many of the benefits of following Jesus Christ throughout the remainder of his Letter to the Romans.

**Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further**

1. Give Paul’s reason for not being ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Can you adopt that same reason for not being ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

2. How did Paul prove people need the gospel?

3. Toward whom does God express His wrath?

4. What might some of the consequences be in a culture or country where almost all of the leaders are godless and wicked?

5. What might you say to someone who said, “To sin is natural”?

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