



International Bible Study Commentary

Verse-by-Verse Bible Lessons Thru the Bible

L.G. Parkhurst, Jr.

Lesson 2

Romans 1:16-32 Commentary New Revised Standard Version

(Romans 1:16) For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, 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 the commentary on [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 through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will 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 with love 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 steadfast love and gracious, He will do this and more for those who have faith and trust in Jesus Christ from beginning to end.

(Romans 1:18) For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.

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 righteous 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 immorality and spiritual evil have influenced them to totally ignore and reject the truth; especially the truth about God and the truth of God as revealed in creation and the Bible. 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. Paul could have added here as he wrote the Christians in Rome what he wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 6:11, "And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." Paul does not give anyone any reason to have spiritual pride or a reason to feel morally superior to others (see also the commentary on [1 Corinthians 6:11-20](#)).

(Romans 1:19) For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it 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, but God had revealed himself to them in other ways—in ways that were good and sufficient.

(Romans 1:20) Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So 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. The Psalmist also revealed this truth in Psalms 19:1-4—

The heavens are telling the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. There is no speech, nor are there words; their voice is not heard; yet their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

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 though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were 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) Claiming 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 or divine power to change their thinking. 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 understanding; they do not think of the long-term or eternal consequences of their choices and actions.

(Romans 1:23) and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

After people in their pride have concluded that 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 the true 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 the true God.

(Romans 1:24) Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves,

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 think and do what they want to think and do 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, but God will often restrain them from hurting His children as much as they otherwise would if they could. God also 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 in Jesus Christ grow in their understanding of nature and nature’s God and of God’s laws and the wisdom of making right choices according to the will of God as revealed in the Bible; whereas, unbelievers lose this understanding and they act with increasing godlessness and wickedness that seems incredible to those who know the truth of God (as Paul shows in his Letter).

(Romans 1:25) because they exchanged the truth about 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. Many of these sins are practiced openly and promoted without opposition in many places in our world today. 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 up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for 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 in God and the truth of the Bible 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 or gives them over to unnatural and false relationships with others and the idols they worship.

(Romans 1:27) and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.

Paul continued to specifically describe how unnatural sin is and how the refusal to repent and return to belief in the true God previously known by observation (and also known in the Word of God, the Bible) 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 self-destructive behaviors and the destruction of others. 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 natural and supernatural penalties than those revealed by Paul in these verses. For example, the unbeliever becomes a slave of sin and Satan, and they begin doing what they would never have thought they would ever do before—they get caught in a downward immoral spiral until they repent and return to God as God has revealed His true character and nature—as truly revealed in the Bible and in nature.

(Romans 1:28) And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done.

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 the commentary on [John 3:11-21](#)).

(Romans 1:29) They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, 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 the news, the movies, and on their televisions (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 or nation 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, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward 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 of 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) foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

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 these immoral people will 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 in a variety of evil ways—they are slaves of sin and Satan. See Jesus’ words on slavery to sin in the commentary on [John 8:31-38](#).

(Romans 1:32) They know God's decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.

In addition to God giving people the ability to observe His creation around them, the ability to think and reason, and the opportunity to know right and wrong from observation and experience, God also 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 that God has given us reveals God's righteous decree—that those who practice such things deserve to die. However, many harden or suppress the influence of their conscience until it will no longer direct, influence, or judge their actions and thoughts. Perhaps you have heard someone say, "They have no conscience;" rather, they have suppressed the influence of their conscience until it no longer has any influence upon their thoughts and behavior. 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 do not want to admit that they deserve death or eternal punishment (hell). They refuse to repent. Even worse, they approve of others who practice these sins too, and they 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 and they deserve to die, they do not need to die the eternal death of those who practice evil and refuse to turn to God. To save sinners, God showed His love for sinners by sending His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, into the world to save repentant sinners from a life of sin and death—this is the Good News (the Gospel) that Paul preached and will explain in his Letter to the Romans. Those who will believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior will cherish the obedience of faith in Jesus Christ that gives them the gift of eternal life—a life of loving God and of loving all those who love God forever. In his letters and throughout the remainder of his Letter to the Romans, Paul describes many of the blessings or benefits of turning from sin and following Jesus Christ as a personal Lord and Savior.

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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