WEEK TWELVE: Romans 1:18-2:1

Romans Good News for All of Us: A Brief Introduction

Paul's epistle to the Romans is the most influential of his letters and has had an enormous impact on Christian theology and doctrine. Part of the reason is that it is the most systematic of Paul's letters; outlining as clearly as in any of his writings his understanding of the good news about Jesus. One consequence has been that Romans has been treated like a systematic theology rather than as an occasional document; one written to address a specific pastoral occasion. Romans, like all of Paul's letters, has a concrete situation that he is wanting to address. Scholars agree that there is evidence of division in the Roman church. The upshot of this is that the doctrine which dominates the first two-thirds of the letter is less an overview of Paul's thought and more of a foundation for the exhortations in the final chapters. In order to better understand the doctrine, we will benefit from better understanding the pastoral issues that Paul is hoping to address. To that end, we will be working through Romans backwards; seeking clarity about the concerns Paul has and then exploring the doctrinal foundations.

I have included an outline of the series and a brief bibliography at the end of this document.

Sermon Outline:

A Brief Overview of This Week's Sermon

Key Text(s): Romans 1:18-2:1

LEADER'S NOTE: Our passage this week contains a few verses – vv. 24-27 – that have been used (and misused) in the contemporary debates about human sexuality and, in particular, same-sex relationships. At the beginning of the sermon I made some broad, general comments about them. You may want to watch these on YouTube prior to your Life Group meeting. In essence I drew attention to the fact that Paul's comments would not have raised eyebrows in the Roman church. His description of a disordered world, including disordered sexuality, was fully in line with wider Jewish attitudes towards sexuality and sexual activity (see Acts 15:20, 29 for the combination of sexual morality and idolatry). Furthermore, Paul's interest in describing the disordered world is secondary to his pastoral concern of unity.

The contemporary debate about human sexuality is incredibly complex. It has been politicised and amplified by an increasingly polarised social media environment. It rests on philosophical foundations that are centuries old, has been assisted by scientific advances, and is informed by our own personal experiences, understanding of key biblical passages (like this one), and theological assumptions. Proceed with caution.

I believe that it is very difficult to get around the moral implications of what Paul has to say here – based as it is on wider biblical teaching – but also that the community of faith must be a place where people can learn to follow Jesus with their whole selves. These conversations must be, first of all, conversations, but also filled with empathy, grace, and willingness to listen and to love even as we seek to conform our lives to the patterns God has created.

Now to the passage…

Romans 1:18-32 describes the disordered world. It's apparent universal scope can lull us into forgetting the pastoral concern Paul is addressing. However, 2:1 grounds this description in the community of faith when Paul provides his

"therefore" – "You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else." This is, of course, a critical issue that Paul will return to in 14:3-4. 10, 13 where he has the Jewish believers in mind. The opening section ends in 3:20 with a declaration that the law will not save, suggesting that even here Paul has the disunity in mind.

This is reinforced by the artful way that Paul describes the disordered world. He begins in a way that is reminiscent of 1st century Jewish critiques of Gentile idolatry – for it is idolatry (not disordered sexuality) that lies at the heart of the human problem. It is those who have suppressed the truth (v. 18), who neither glorify nor thank God (v. 21) who exchanged the glory of God for idols (v. 23, 25) and who, ultimately do what they know is against God's righteous decree and approve of those who do the same (v. 32).

It is this rejection of God that leads God to "give them over" (vv. 24, 26, 28) to their sinful desires, shameful lusts, and a depraved mind (and, again, it is not the disordered sexuality that is the climax of the list). People are allowed to follow their hearts, rather than God's ways, with devastating consequences.

What is striking is that while Paul appears to imitate Jewish critiques of Gentile idolatry, he weaves Israel's story into it. This becomes clearer the further into the description. At the beginning it appears he is speaking about general revelation – what can be known about God by observing the created order. And there is a quite a bit we can learn from careful observation. Wisdom literature is based on creation – God created the material world and the moral one. By observation we learn that hard work pays off, that truthfulness is the best way, that who we spend our time with will shape who we are, etc.

By the end of the description, however, there is more than general revelation at work. Those who knew God's righteous decree must go beyond observation to revelation – the kind of revelation that had been given to Israel.

The language of 'exchanging' glory for idols also reflects Psalm 106:19-23 which describes Israel's idolatry at Mount Horeb. And of course, the prophets (such as Hosea and Ezekiel) use the image of sexual immorality to describe Israel's idolatry. Paul is not describing the human condition as much as he is describing the common condition that Jewish and Gentile believers were saved from. This is a subtle difference, but an important one. Their unity is an expression of their common salvation from a common enemy.

There is, however, another important observation we must make about this section. Just as the heading before 2:1 is a little unhelpful; suggesting that 2:1 is a new thought, so the heading before 1:18 distracts us from the connections.

Verse 18 is a parallel to verse 17. In both something is revealed – God's righteousness and God's wrath. These are two sides of one coin since God's righteousness – what God is like and what God does – is the basis of his saving work. If God is going to save, there will be judgment of the enemies from whom God saves his people. The order of these two revelations is important. Righteousness is the A-side. Wrath is the B-side. The hit is usually on the A side, not the B-side. Too often we start the story of the good news with God's wrath, as if he were only just able to hold himself back from destroying us. The story begins with righteousness and both are grounded in the true beginning of the good news: God's power to save those who believe!

God's wrath is a consequence of his willingness to save through a righteousness that comes by faith. We are saved from the power of sin – described in this section – not primarily from God's wrath (though the alignment of our lives to the values, priorities, and behaviours of Sin places us under God's wrath). We need God's power to save, since the power of sin is immense. We only have to look at the world in which we live – it's a mess – and our place in it to see that. As those who have placed our faith in Jesus, we have been saved from Sin's power and its consequences, and this forms the basis of our unity!

Questions to Ask

1. Paul's description of the disordered world begins with idolatry rather than particular behaviours. Why do you think idolatry is presented as the root problem, and where do we see subtle forms of idolatry at work in our own lives or culture?
2. Romans 2:1 turns the focus from "they" to "you." How does this challenge the way we read Romans 1:18-32, especially when we are tempted to judge others from a distance?

3. The sermon suggested that Paul is describing the common condition from which both Jewish and Gentile believers have been saved. How might remembering our common need for grace strengthen unity in the church?
4. What does it mean that God "gave them over" to their desires, and how does this help us understand both the seriousness of sin and the mercy of God's saving power?
5. The sermon described God's righteousness as the "A-side" and God's wrath as the "B-side." How does beginning the good news with God's power to save shape the way we speak about sin, judgment, and salvation?
6. In light of this passage, what is one practical step our Life Group can take to become a safer, more gracious place for honest conversation, repentance, and growth together?

A Prayer to Pray

Continue to pray for the unity of our community of faith. In particular, pray that we might demonstrate our unity more, and more significantly.

A Practice to Try

Choose one of the first steps you identified in Q. 6 above and implement it this week.

Readings to Read This Week

The following passages reflect on the power of sin; that which we have been saved from. (Notice how often sexual immorality is included in the vice lists.)

1. Ephesians 5:3-7
2. Matthew 15:17-20
3. Colossians 3:5-6
4. James 1:14-15
5. Galatians 5:19-21

A Mission Commitment to Reflect on

One of our values is to be Others-Focused. The unity of the body of Christ is a mission-critical matter. Putting others first, serving them, and seeking to demonstrate our love for one another are all things we can do to strengthen our unity.

A GBC Initiative to Promote/Celebrate

Each week we will provide you with a key aspect of our community news that we would encourage you to remind your Life Group about.

1. Please pass on our thanks to those who have a) helped us catch up in our Ministry Budget by giving a one-off gift and/or increasing their regular giving; and b) completed the survey!

Good News For All of Us – Sermon Series outline

Please note that this is subject to change, but as it stands right now…

Term 1 (Romans 12-16)		Term 2 (Romans 9-11)		Term 3 (Romans 1-4)		Term 4 (Romans 5-8)	
15/2	Romans 16	7/6	9:1-29	16/8	1:1-17	25/10	TBD
22/2	15:14-33	14/6	9:30-10:21	23/8	1:18-32	1/11	TBD
1/3	14:1-15:13	21/6	11:1-24	30/8	2:1-16	8/11	TBD
8/3	12:14-13:7	28/6	11:25-36	6/9	2:17-3:8	15/11	TBD

15/3	12:1-13			13/9	3:9-31	22/11	TBD
22/3	13:8-14			20/9	4:1-25	29/11	TBD
29/3	Easter						
5/4	Easter						

A Brief Bibliography

The following commentaries have been utilised in the preparation and delivery of this series.

Bird, Michael, 2016, *Romans*, Story of God Bible Commentary, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Gorman, Michael J., 2022, *Romans: A theological and pastoral commentary*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan.

McKnight, Scot, 2019, *Reading Romans Backwards: A Gospel of Peace in the Midst of Empire*, Baylor University Press, Waco, Texas.

Witherington, Ben III, 2004, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan.