

Exegesis Romans 1:18-25

18 The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

19 since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.

22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools

23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

24 Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

25 They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Overview

Paul's theme is universal and inexcusable human sinfulness. He understands that s essentially a refusal to honour and obey the loving God whose existence we know deep down. He says we look at nature and it shows God's intelligence and design and warn that we can be so impressed by how smart nature is that we can end up worshipping it and its animals. This leads on to an argument for why it is a sin for women to have sex with women and men with men. This reflects the fact that such relations bypass nature's design. A man and woman's body fit. This is what all who have reservations about homosexuality base them on and revisionists of Paul who try to argue he did not condemn committed gay relationships have to admit that Paul was like all who have reservations. Its shown in the text.

Paul like Jesus has the Genesis text in mind which says that God's plan was always a committed relationship between man and woman in marriage with bodies fitting in sex.

Context - Historical

Paul is writing to believers in Rome who are surrounded by a culture of decadence and paganism. He makes out that the society has made itself unrealistic and angry and unhappy as a result. Paul liked to think that there is only going to be negative effects when a society rejects God.

Paul writes that all are under the wrath of God. In other words, "God preserves his justice by judging and condemning all human beings" [1].

God's wrath against all is a theme in the apocalyptic theology that was current in the early Church [2]. It was relevant because extreme suffering and injustice cloaked the world. Christians await the return of Jesus meaning the world is in the end-times and has been since his ascension.

Paul's readers could relate easily to the passage. They were largely former Jews and some Gentiles who became believers [3]. The Jews could relate to the doctrine that all are estranged from God by sin. The Gentiles saw the foolishness of idolatry for they had been idolaters themselves. They saw the sexual immorality that idolatry led to.

Paul complains that Rome's pagan society honours gods in the form of creatures instead of the praiseworthy creator. This implies that they adored morally lax gods who did not judge sin. Paul wanted to put his God's justice in its right place showing us the truth of Schreiner's words, "Honouring God should be the goal of ethics" [4]. Ethics is about what I ought to do. Therefore there is no real ethics where pleasing God isn't the goal! Paul would have been aware of the hold godless pagan philosophers had over Rome and is challenging it.

Context - Literary

The passage is an apologist's polemic.

The Letter of Paul to the Romans has the following structure. After greetings, Paul declares that the whole human race was

and is estranged from God by sin and receives justification - God declaring the sinner right with him - purely as a gift from God. He then discusses Israel's position with God and hopes for its redemption. He concludes with matters concerning the life of the believer.

The text we are looking at is part of his argument for the whole world being under divine wrath. The passage is condemning and negative when looked at in isolation from the context. It appears in a letter that is based on the gospel. The gospel gives us the way out of the darkness of idolatry and its moral consequences. So the passage is intended to pave the way for hope.

Paul was a Jewish scholar. He would have imbibed the Jewish tendency to see idolatry as causing one to tend towards moral evil "The passage is reminiscent of Jewish apologetic arguments in which Gentile idolatry was derided and the moral sins of the Gentile world were traced to that idolatry" [5].

What is the Passage About?

Paul writes "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven" [6] meaning we should see that God has the right to be angry with us and judge and punish us. Though Siefrid thinks Paul does not state here that the wrath is directed at the whole world [7], Paul indirectly says it. Why say heaven? He says from heaven giving the impression the wrath comes down on whatever is below Heaven - the whole earth. He speaks later on of how God's existence is plainly seen by all since the creation so he really has all humanity in mind.

Paul condemns those who he feels hide the truth about God by their sins. For Paul, man could still see God as good though man disobeys him. Paul means people fail to show what God is like when they refuse to be like him and obey his law of love. But that is at the back of his mind. He goes on to state that the divinity and eternal nature of God can be seen from the creation.

Paul's argument "what may be known about God is plain to them" is worthless unless he is thinking of all people not just some. It would open up the way for some to say, "But I'm an exception!" His purpose is to show there is no excuse for disobedience of God. As Paul sees the knowledge of God as a gift from God, it follows that he does not think we figure out his existence for ourselves but God makes it plain meaning God is the agent of our knowledge.

Paul taught, as Johnson says, that "all people know certain truths about God... [God] has continually ... revealed Himself to all human beings through the created order of existence" [8]. I agree. But it's a pity Johnson never said why we should assume Paul refers to all people. As the context is the sinfulness of both Jew and non-Jew, it is a mistake to argue that Paul thinks only some people are idolaters. "the gospel ... is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile" [9].

The world knows the presence of God but "the knowledge that all people have through the natural world is not saving knowledge" [10]. Many define "saving knowledge" as an encounter with God and his attractiveness that changes us - God does not change us from outside. He helps us change from within. To reject saving knowledge would be idolatry in itself for its choosing the idea of God rather than God himself.

Since Aquinas and Anselm put forward philosophical arguments for the existence of God, some have thought Paul was arguing that we all have philosophical arguments for God's existence. Schreiner corrects this, "Paul is not suggesting that philosophical arguments for the existence of God are needed" [11]. Indeed Christians claim as children we were too young to work out arguments but that we had a sense of God.

Paul states that creation and God are two different entities. The creator is not the creation.

Paul begins his statement of the evidence that all are guilty of adoring as divine what is not divine.

Paul has told us about those who darken their sense of God and claim to be wise and start to worship images of people and animals. He says they have thrown away the sense of God's glory and dignity and how different he is from mere creatures and have become fools in doing so. Could those people be worshipping an undignified version of God when they know better? Are the worshipping God darkly? Or are they in fact not worshipping God at all?

There is no room for thinking that the idolaters were adoring God darkly when they worshipped their images of people and animals [12]. He writes that they "served created things rather than the Creator" [13]. They are completely cut off. There is no room in this theology for the hope that the idolaters just have a bad way of adoring the one true God.

God "gave [the idolaters] over in the sinful desires of their hearts" [14]. Paul does not say that the idolaters were forced to sin by God. They only got what they wanted.

Paul speaks of idolatry against God. Then a sudden reference to sexual misuse and abuse of the body appears. Then he returns to the subject of idolatry. The reference to sexual sin is like an insertion. The text flows better without it. But we can be sure it's positioned the way it is for a reason. I see the illicit sex as being idolatry in itself. Paul then is not just talking about religious idolatry but also the form of idolatry that isn't religious but which ignores God. No wonder Schreiner writes that God hands people over to sin and this "is attributed to their rejection of God. All human sins, in other words, have their fountainhead in idolatry" [15].

Paul in the text merely speaks of sexual immorality. He condemns homosexual activity elsewhere but it does not follow that he referred only to that kind of immorality here. He must be understood as condemning all degrading sex referring to sex outside of a loving marriage [16].

The idolaters have abandoned God and thus have invited him to abandon them. Paul says this leads them to illicit and degrading sex. He does not say why. As he speaks of God being degraded by idol-worshippers, that may indicate that if you degrade God unjustly you will soon begin to degrade yourself. The passage does not clearly indicate that if you cut yourself off from a God of dignity and beauty you cut yourself off the help he can give you to make you grow like him.

Paul gives us two definitions for idolatry. One is the religious worship of the creature rather than the creator. Two is the exchange of the truth of God for a lie - Paul "implicitly equates unbelief with idolatry" [17]. Both of these elements are contained in every sin. Think of avarice - loving money more than God and lying to yourself that it will make you happy forever. Avarice is a form of idolatry. No wonder Paul can say we are all under wrath for idolatry though many of us have never practiced the worship of images or pagan gods.

Relevant Today?

Paul's stress on divine justice shows his sense that people would protest that they know nothing of God so they didn't deliberately do wrong to him and they will deny that his anger is justified.

Punishing and judging are almost banished from the modern mindset. Paul's text calls us back to them.

Some say that instead of trying to reason that evildoers need to be deterred from evil or reformed by inflicting suffering on them, Paul shows that it is better to just admit they deserve punishment. They allege that no other approach truly respects them - if people do not deserve suffering then it is not right to hurt them for the sake of deterring or reforming them.

There can be no gospel of love without respect for justice.

Significance

The text claims that we know God but that the knowledge must lead us away from sin to him in a relationship of worship.

The text is relevant to Christians in today's secular age wherein the political gods of decadence and false liberty are adored. It needs to be studied by today's professing Christians who try to corrupt divine truth and worship a God they want to believe in as if faith is about them and not God and righteousness.

The text gives the Christian confidence that everybody has a sense of God. That helps to build a common ground with the unbeliever. The unbelievers can be helped to excavate their innate knowledge of God.

The believer is called to be a missionary and to share the gospel with others and to invite them to find joy in Christ Jesus. Sharing the gospel requires that first of all believers find common ground with non-believers. Paul says we all know the basics about God but warns that knowledge can be obscured. If the Christian and the unbeliever agree to look for common ground, maybe they could try to look within and see if they can find traces of knowledge of God. This has to be done prayerfully because unless God gives us guidance we will only be led further into error by the blindness caused by our sins.

Homosexuality

Homosexuality and lesbianism are condemned in Romans 1. Referring to those who refuse to admit that God has set up nature, 1:20 uses a legal term which is translated "declared without excuse." This is important. The term appears again at Romans 2:1 and refers to those who have no legal answer to make. One point Paul will make is that same sex sex is against nature. 1.26 speaks of against nature. Nature is physis and is linked to birth and biological reproduction.

Romans 1:28 speaks of a recompense for men who sleep with men. This is linked to the delusion or error they wanted to have. Thus it is seen by many as saying that the recompense is being stuck in perverted desires. The thought is that things

like sexually transmitted diseases and the viciousness with which gays treat gays are linked to trying to conquer nature and upset its balance and are not the recompense. The text 1:27 is clear being stuck with same sex desires is the punishment. Romans chapters 7 and 8 talks about how you sin and soon you find yourself under its spell and it gets a greater hold on you and its power grows.

The suggestion in Romans that religious perverts turn God into the image of man can be read as a denial that Jesus Christ is literally God. Jesus is the image of God but God is not the image of Jesus.

1 Corinthians 5:11 is definite that we should not invite the company of somebody who is into sexual sin. The man under discussion is living in sin with his stepmother. Imagine then how much more we should, in Paul's scheme, avoid the company of gay people who are actively sexual.

Significance for atheists

The passage prompts us to search our hearts and find that we have a sense of God who we can offend by sin. So we are without excuse when we sin. But atheists know this is not true. Sincere atheists know that sin in terms of offending God deliberately is impossible for them. You cannot culpably offend a God you do not believe in.

The passage accuses atheists of being idolaters.

The passage argues that religious people can be idolaters too.

The passage says that idolatry though bad will lead to far far worse badness.

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[1] Schreiner, T. R., Paul Apostle of God's Glory in Christ (IVP, 2001) p. 201

[2] 1 Cor 7:29

[3] Peterson, D., Paul's Letter to the Romans (Moore Theological College, 1994) p. 12

[4] Schreiner, T. R., Paul Apostle of God's Glory in Christ (IVP, 2001) p. 28

[5] Moody, D. J. The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Epistle to the Romans (Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1996) p. 97

[6] Rom 1:18

[7] Seifrid, M.A., Christ, Our Righteousness (IVP, 2000) p. 49, "At this juncture ... he will make no explicit accusation against all humanity".

[8] Johnson, A. Romans- Everyman's Bible Commentary (Moody, 2000) p. 120

[9] Rom 1:16

[10] Seifrid, M.A., Christ, Our Righteousness (IVP, 2000) p. 104

[11] Schreiner, T. R., Paul Apostle of God's Glory in Christ, (IVP, 2001) p. 104

[12] Seifrid, M.A., Christ, Our Righteousness, (IVP, 2000), p. 50, "He does not have in mind some residual, limited capacity within the fallen human being to know God".

[13] Rom 1:25

[14] Rom 1:24

[15] Seifrid, M.A., Christ, Our Righteousness, (IVP, 2000), p. 106

[16] Peterson, D., Paul's Letter to the Romans (Moore Theological College, 1994) p. 25

[17] Seifrid, M.A., Christ, Our Righteousness (IVP, 2000) p. 58