

# No Excuses – Part 2

Romans 1:21-23

March 12, 2017

## Introduction:

This morning we're going to continue with the second part of the sermon I began last week dealing with the question of, **Why is the wrath of God being justly revealed against all of mankind?** As the apostle Paul begins explaining the gospel to the Romans, he starts not with the love of God but rather the wrath of God, saying in v. 18 that, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness." Nobody likes the idea of wrath and punishment and so one of the first things we naturally do when faced with the prospect of being punished is try to make excuses to get out of it.

Consider children and how they respond to the threat of punishment. They look for a way out, right? They blame it on their sister or brother or on ignorance or anything other than, "Yes, it's my fault and I deserve it." Of course, we don't exactly improve much as adults. Think of the last time the police pulled you over for speeding. While you were looking at those blue and red flashing lights in your rearview mirror, waiting for the police officer to come strolling over to your car door, how many excuses were you able to muster up in short order in hopes of convincing him to let you off the hook?

So Paul understands human nature enough to know that we tend to make excuses when we are threatened with punishment. Therefore, no sooner than he mentions God's wrath he immediately turns to demonstrating why we justly deserve it, showing that no matter how much we try to weasel our way out of it, we are without excuse. So then, let's begin by first reading our passage. If you haven't already, please open your Bibles to the first chapter of Romans, which can be found on pg. 939 of the pew Bibles if you need to use one of those. Our focus this morning will be on v. 21-23, but so we can keep the context in mind, I'll start reading at v. 18. Please follow along as I read. Paul writes, "**For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.**"

Now by way of quick review, we are working on answering the question, **Why is the wrath of God being justly revealed against all of mankind?** The first reason, which was our first point during last week's sermon, was **because they should have recognized God through the creation.** We learned from v. 20 that God has revealed himself as the all-powerful Creator to every human being through creation. No matter who you are, no matter how primitive or technologically advanced your culture, the natural world provides enough information for anyone to discern that God exists and is magnificently powerful.

Thus, Paul says at the end of v. 20 that **“they are without excuse.”** Nobody can claim, “Well, don’t blame me. I didn’t know God existed.” Even if you’ve never seen a Bible or never had a missionary come to your village, God has placed enough revelation of himself in the natural world that everyone is made accountable to God for properly responding to what they do know about him.

And what should our response be to the universal revelation of God’s divine nature and eternal power given to all mankind through creation? That then brings us to the second answer to our question about why God is just in revealing his wrath against all mankind and it is this...

## 2. **Because they neither honored God nor gave him thanks (v. 21)**

Look at what Paul says in v. 21. **“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”** Let’s unpack this verse together.

First, Paul says that through God’s revelation of himself in nature, **“they knew God.”** This doesn’t mean they had a saving knowledge of God but rather simply they had an intellectual knowledge of him. They knew he existed. By looking at creation, everyone should come to the same inescapable conclusion that there must be an all-powerful Creator responsible for everything that had been made. As I mentioned last week, you don’t discover lost tribes of primitive atheists. The belief in the divine is universal across all cultures and even those primitive tribes in South American rain forests recognize that there’s a god or gods more powerful than they are. So everyone, by looking at nothing more than creation, comes to the realization of God’s existence.

Now of course, there are some people who suppress that basic knowledge of God’s existence. Atheism, for example, is the willful suppression of what people deep in their heart know to be true but nevertheless refuse to believe. To deny God’s existence is the ultimate expression of what Paul said at the end of v. 18, that people **“by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.”** Other people, such as agnostics, suppress the truth by acknowledging that some kind of divine being exists, but think that who or what he is like is either unknowable or they just don’t care. But either way, be they atheist or agnostic, they are denying what they intuitively know is true: God exists. They have willfully suppressed that knowledge to allow themselves to ignore and evade the truth.

So then, since everyone knows deep down that God’s exists from what is revealed of him through creation, the response they should have to that knowledge is two-fold. Paul says they were to **“honor him as God”** and **“give thanks to him.”** What does that mean? First, to honor God is to give him the respect that he deserves by virtue of who he is. For example, we use Memorial Day as a time to give special honor to those who have served in the military. To honor a soldier is to show them respect, to acknowledge their sacrifice to protect us, to hold in high esteem their hard work of training and discipline they underwent to serve in the military. Honor is the fitting response to who they are and what they’ve done for us.

What does it mean to honor God then? Given who he is, it can mean no less than our worship. God is worthy of our highest praise and adoration for he's the one responsible for our very existence and for everything we enjoy in life. If God is the one who spoke the universe into existence, with its billions upon billions of galaxies, and he is our Creator to whom we owe our very lives, then no higher honor can be given to him than to worship him as the Almighty, infinite God that he is. So honor, when it comes to God, is worship, praising him for who is and adoring him for all that he has made.

The second response is that of gratitude; we're to **"give thanks to him"** for what he has done by creating us and giving a world of such marvelous beauty and bountifulness to live on. When we consider how well creation is designed to allow for human survival and thriving, there's much to give thanks for. For example, when I'm talking walks out in the woods, I'll reflect on how amazing it is that we can use wood and water, rocks and sand, air and fire, and from that create amazing things like airplanes and cell phones. God gave us a world that allows us to unlock the potential in the material creation to make all kinds of useful things. Or I think of the fact that a few seeds in the ground can grow into a crop that yields a hundred-fold, so that we can live beyond mere survival mode but have a surplus of food. Or I'll think about how amazing it is that the human body can heal itself from injuries or disease because God has designed us so our blood will clot and so we have immune systems to fight off infections.

I could go on about the amazing aspects of creation but I think you know as well as I do that we have a great deal to be thankful for, from food and clothing, to beautiful sunrises to purple-mountain majesties. When we ponder all the wonders of creation, we are to recognize God as the Creator and in turn give him praise and thanks for all of it.

But we don't. Paul says, **"They did not honor him as God or give thanks to him..."** How often are we ungrateful for all that has been given to us? How frequently do we forget God in the busyness of our lives, neglecting to seek him in prayer, pridefully boasting of our own achievements, carrying on as if God didn't even exist? We act so often as if things are ours by right, that somehow we've earned whatever it is we've gained, as if we were self-sufficient, the master and commander of our destinies.

I know many of us don't consider ungratefulness to be that grievous of a sin, but God apparently has a different perspective. The wrath of God is being revealed against us because we have not honored God nor given him thanks. And why is this? Why does God consider ungratefulness to be such a serious sin? Well, think for a moment about what it means to be thankful. Ultimately, a thankful person is a humble person. He or she recognizes what they've received was not earned but given as a gift. Thankfulness is always other-focused. It sees and appreciates the value in the gift-giver while at the same time acknowledging the unworthiness of oneself.

But to not give thanks, to be ungrateful, is the fruit of pride. Proud people don't say thanks because they feel they deserve whatever benefits they get. Instead of thinking to themselves, "I'm not worthy of such a generous gift," they think, "Well, it's about time. I deserve it." If you're a parent, perhaps you've experienced this with your own children. I know I get angry with my kids when I do something generous for them like

take them out to a really nice restaurant and they neither acknowledge it with a word of thanks, or worse, complain about some aspect of it. My girls know ungratefulness gets me angry and so also is it true with God. God hates ingratitude because at its core, it comes from a heart of pride that doesn't recognize its own unworthiness and instead makes much of itself without recognizing the kindness and generosity of God.

So as a result, Paul goes on to say at the end of v. 21, “...**but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.**” People who forget God and act as if the world ought to revolve around them are “**futile**” in their thinking. The word “futile” carries with it the idea of pointlessness, of never being able to accomplish its goal, of failing to get a useful result. It's like trying to carry water in a bucket whose bottom is rusted out. It doesn't matter how many times you go to the river try to fill it, by the time you reach you intended destination the water will have all leaked out.

Let me tell you, it's pointless to live your life without honoring God or giving him thanks. As Jesus once said, “What does it profit a man to gain a fortune but lose his soul?” It doesn't. It's futile to live a self-centered, ungrateful, life in pursue of money and fame and possessions only to discover that the God who you've ignored all your life will no longer allow you to ignore him after you die. Or to use another metaphor from Jesus, it's futile to build the house of your life on the sand because the tide will come and wash your foundation away. A life lived without regard to God is utterly futile.

Furthermore, rejecting God results in “**foolish hearts**” becoming “**darkened.**” Psalm 14:1 says, “A fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’” Only a fool denies the obvious. The existence of the world and the universe cries out the existence of a Creator who is responsible for it all. You're a fool to think otherwise. Thus, to deny this truth that God has made plain to all through creation is to have a one's heart “**darkened.**” The heart was understood not merely to be the seat of emotions but of the whole person, thus Paul is saying here that the whole individual, from his reasoning to his emotions, is in essence blind. They're in the dark as it were. They can't see correctly that God is the one who made everything and to whom they owe honor and thanks and as a result, they are “in the dark” about how things really are.

It's worth saying here that any kind of self-help book that claims to describe the human condition and lay out a path for happiness and fulfillment that doesn't have God at the center of it is only good for toilet paper or kindling for a fire. Such a person has missed the essential component is understanding who we really are and how we ought to live. Deny God, leave him out of the picture, don't include him in the equation, and you will fail at gaining true understanding of who you are and what you need for true joy. So don't waste your time with counselors or teachers of authors who claim to help yet reject God. By denying God, they've failed in a fundamental way right from the start and so are not wise but are in fact foolish and darkened in their understanding.

So then, in light of our lack of responding to God properly, God is indeed just to reveal his wrath against us. He has made himself known to us through creation, yet we've suppressed this truth. Instead of giving him the honor and thanks he deserves, we've chosen to ignore him or deny him. But there's one more answer to the question of,

**“Why is the wrath of God being justly revealed against all of mankind?”** that we need to consider this morning, and that answer is found in v. 22-23. So the third reason why God is just in revealing his wrath against all mankind is...

### **3. Because they foolishly worshiped the creation instead of the creator (v. 22-23)**

Please look at v. 22-23 in your Bible with me once again. **“Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”**

First off, I want you to notice how utterly foolish people are. Instead of worshiping God, whose power and glory are plainly seen in creation they instead exchange it for the worship of images of far lesser created things. This is the height of foolishness. Think of it like this: imagine a man was given as a gift a brand new, 2017 cherry red Lamborghini, but instead of keeping it, he decided to exchange it for a toy Lamborghini like one of the Hot Wheel cars your kids played with. But even worse than that, he exchanged it for just an image of a Lamborghini, a picture cut out from a magazine. Then he came to you bragging about the trade he made, claiming to be so wise to have exchanged his 2017 Lamborghini for this delightful picture of one. What would you think of such a man? Would you think he was wise or the biggest fool who ever walked the face of the earth?

So with that analogy in mind, read v. 22-23 with me again. **“Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.”** Fools! Idiots! Morons! Who in their right mind would exchange the glory of the immortal God who created this amazing universe and by whom we are fearfully and wonderfully made for mere images that resemble man and birds and animals and insects? I’ll tell you who: us. You and I and everyone else on this planet. You aren’t reading about somebody else here: this is true of us.

I know the first thing that comes into our minds when reading these verses are those poor primitive people who worship all kinds of crazy gods, like the sun god or moon god or who carve out little statues in stone or wood that look like birds or cows or whatever other animal they happened to decide to use as an image of the divine. We look down our nose at them and think, “Oh how quaint, they like to worship their little chicken-duck-woman-thing,” but of course we are so much more advanced, we wouldn’t fall into such blatant gross idolatry like that.

True, we may not make stone idols of bird gods, but we still give our hearts to that which is created as opposed to the creator. Anything we pursue in this world more than God, anything which we seek after that we believe will bring happiness, fulfillment, or security to us is no less an idol in our hearts than any graven image was to those living in Rome. For some of us, we have exchanged the glory of God for money and with it all the things it can buy: large houses, cars, boats, vacations, the feeling of security for the future. For others, it’s success: achieving that career goal at all costs, so you work those long hours to excel in your career even if it happens to neglect your marriage and children. It can

be the approval of others, so in school you do things you wouldn't ordinarily do in order to impress others, to get in with the popular people, or at your job you join with others in their sinful words and actions in order to fit in and not be ridiculed. We can exchange the glory of God for relationships, making that boyfriend or spouse or child the single most important thing in your life, such that you wrap your whole identity around them, only to find yourself totally undone when they break up with you, or divorce you, or finally leave home and don't need you to be their mother any longer.

But let me dare be even more pointed with you for a moment because I think there is a way in our society that we especially are guilty of exchanging the glory of our Creator for mere images and that is in the realm of pornography. To look at porn is to look at images of the human body. It is to take delight in mere pictures of what God created. So let me be clear here so there is no misunderstanding: viewing pornography is an act of worship, but not the worship of God, but rather the worship of the human form. When Paul speaks of God's wrath being poured out on those who exchanged the glory of the immortal God **"for images resembling mortal man"** that describes the multi-billion dollar pornography industry in a nutshell. Every magazine photo, every image or video on a web site, is exactly what Paul is talking about in v. 23. It is a rejection of God as our creator and is a full-orbed worship of a mere image of a human body, created by God but used for immoral ends.

So my friends, don't for a moment look down your nose at those primitive tribes with their sun god and rain god. We've created millions upon millions of web sites loaded with billions of photos and videos so we can sit in front of our computers and worship the human body. Our idol factory is big business here in the US. We can't get enough of viewing the human body because we, like every other person who has ever lived, willingly suppress the truth of God and gladly exchange the glory of our Creator for the cheap porridge of making idols out of God's creation.

## **Conclusion**

In light of this then, I ask, "Is God just in revealing his wrath against all mankind? Absolutely. God's wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. They reject the revelation of his power and glory revealed in creation. They refuse to honor him or give thanks to him. Instead, they ignore their Creator and make gods out the creation, and then have the audacity to claim to be wise by doing so. This is the truth about everyone, including me and you. Our love of money, our love of sex, our love of popularity and success and power and everything else in God's good creation except for God himself is sin and God is absolutely right and just to respond to the whole rebellious wicked mess with his wrath.

So what are we to do? Let me give you two responses and then we're done. The first is repentance and repentance begins by owning your sin, by recognizing and admitting that this passage is true. This needs to be the first step because we live in a culture that continues to suppress the truth about God by only focusing on his love and acceptance while at the same time denying his wrath. This passage teaches us that God's default setting toward mankind is not glowing feelings of love and delight. He's not the indulgent

heavenly grandfather who kindly looks down at our behavior and says, "Well, boys will be boys." Our rejection of him, our failure to honor him and give him thanks, is resulting in and will result in his wrath. Holy wrath. Divine wrath that will bring about punishment in this life and the next. We all need to come to grips with the hard and uncomfortable truth that God's wrath is what stands against us for our sins, and that includes each and every one of us, not just those people who are in gangs or do drugs or who vote differently than you. We all stand before him without excuse. No one will be able to utter the words, "But God..." when they stand before his throne. There is no excuse for our ungrateful, self-centered, idolatrous hearts. God has made himself known through creation and we all have rejected him. Not one of us stands innocent before him.

But the second response is even more important and that's faith. Repentance should lead one to cry out to God for deliverance. It should cast its eyes upwards to God in hope that his righteous judge might also be his merciful redeemer. And should we in repentance do that, this is indeed what we find. What makes the gospel so glorious is that the wrath of God we justly deserve has been satisfied by Christ's atoning death on the cross. Jesus suffered in our place so that God's wrath need no longer stand against us. God calls us only to look to him in faith and believe. God promises us in the God that whoever believes in Jesus will not perish under his wrath but have eternal life.

We are right to dread the wrath of God. We have been fools to reject him to begin with. But we will be eternal fools should we reject God's offer of salvation through faith in Christ. So be not a fool any longer! Repent of your sin by recognizing these verses as being true of you as they are of everyone else, but then find an escape from God's wrath by trusting in God's mercy, given to you graciously through his Son, Jesus Christ. Let's pray.