



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Where It All Went Wrong

Romans 1-3

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### *Introduction*

1. Think for a moment about a favorite picture of a small child (your child / grandchild, niece / nephew, etc.). Notice their innocence and purity.
2. Now, think about the human condition: from a few recent news stories, then from our own behavior (e.g., leaning on the horn when cut off in traffic, etc.).
  - a. Why do people act that way? Treat each other that way? Why do others condone evil? Personally, why did the rude person who set us off act that way? Why did we?
  - b. Why does that innocent child soon catch on the way of self/sin?
  - c. Why is the world so messed up? “Rare” diseases,<sup>1</sup> congenital maladies, nature gone awry, etc.
3. The Bible’s answer is that we live as fallen people in a creation “longing to be set free from its bondage to corruption” (Rom. 8:21). At the personal level, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).
4. We also face an adversary (the Hebrew meaning of “*satan*”) who is out for no good, deceptively dedicated to our corruption (John 8:44; 2 Cor. 4:4). Try as we might, “[our] iniquities have made a separation between [us] and [our] God, and [our] sins have hidden his face from [us] so that he does not hear” (Isa. 59:2).
5. Let’s not downplay the problem, but see it clearly, guided by Paul (Romans 1:18-3:20).

### *Body*

- I. Seeing the Universal Problem.
  - A. That the gospel is God’s power to save (Rom. 1:16), should prompt us to ask, “save from what?” Paul devotes the first 64 verses of the body of Romans (14.7% of the total) the answer (1:18-3:20).
  - B. He begins the widest possible circle and gradually narrows the field.
    1. All humanity (1:18).
    2. All humans who had not been given special revelation (1:19-32).

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<sup>1</sup> I recall reading in Peter Kreeft’s *Making Sense Out of Suffering* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Books, 1986) a comment about how common rare diseases seem to be.

3. To the [relatively] righteous person, especially the Jew (2:1-16).<sup>2</sup>
4. Explicitly to the Jew who placed his trust in the law (2:17-3:8).
5. He concludes the section with a summary (3:9-20).<sup>3</sup>

## II. Seeing the Extent of the Problem.

- A. Paul's assessment of Gentile failure emphasizes the fact that people used their God-given freedom to sin.
  1. Despite evidence of God's being and glory, they chose to pursue their own thinking and so turned to images (1:19-23).
  2. They then chose behaviors in line with their self-centered thinking, a course God allowed them to pursue (1:24-32; see Eph. 4:17-24).<sup>4</sup>
  3. Their freedom had consequences.
    - a) "For the wrath of God is being revealed" (18); the verb is present tense. This is not a threat of future punishment (hell), but an insight into the consequences for people who relentlessly pursue the full possibilities of human freedom.<sup>5</sup>
    - b) Consequently, "God gave them up" (1:24, 26, 28) to reap the consequences of their behaviors. God will let us do what we want to do.
    - c) Paul depicts "self-delusion [that results in] a self-destructive and society destructive delusion" (Dunn, 76).
- B. He then shows that receiving God's special revelation did not eliminate sin (2:1-3:8).
  1. Evidence from the time shows Jews who were often quite self-confident about their standing before God, oblivious of [at least the depth] of their own sin (see Phil. 3:4-6; Lk. 18:9-14), and expecting that the sins they did commit would be treated differently from those of the Gentiles (see Dunn, 91; Moo, 126).
  2. Paul's point is plain from the very beginning: "... you have no excuse..." (2:1).
    - a) They who passed judgment on Gentile decadence "practice[d] the very same things" and were liable to God's judgment (2:1-5).
    - b) They, too, practiced self-willed freedom (2:6-11, esp. 8).
    - c) They didn't obey the law they had (and sin doesn't) (2:12-16, esp. 13, 15).
  3. He then narrows his focus even more, exposing a different form of a God-complex (see 1:19-23) and failure to see their true condition (2:17-29).
    - a) They disobeyed — and brought shame on God's name (24) — despite their enormous (and explicit) self confidence (2:17-23, esp. 17-19).
    - b) They actually turned their circumcision — one of the things that identified them as God's special people — into uncircumcision and were worse than

<sup>2</sup> Commentators discuss whether 2:1-16 are talking about the Gentile moralist or the Jews; there is no doubt that 2:17-3:8 refers to the Jews ("But if you call yourself a Jew. . ." - v. 17).

<sup>3</sup> See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 92-93, who recommends thinking of this progression as a series of concentric circles moving inward from 1:18 to 3:8.

<sup>4</sup> As one of my teachers summarized it, "People act the way they do because they think the way they do."

<sup>5</sup> James Dunn comments, "The miserable list of antisocial behavior (vv 29-31) illustrates just what human wisdom in its vaunted independence from God ends up justifying to itself (it would not be difficult to extend the list with twentieth-century examples). It is such self-delusion which lies at the heart of so much human conduct" (James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary 38A [Dallas, TX: Word Books, Publisher, 1988], 76).

uncircumcised Gentiles who nevertheless obeyed (2:25-29, esp. 25-26, 29 [compare with Jer. 4:4]).

4. To be sure, possession of the special revelation counted for something; it just did not render them guiltless (3:1-8, esp. 1-2).

C. 3:9-20 clinch the argument and illustrate it from the Jews' own law (vv. 10-18 cite, respectively, Psa. 14:1-3=53:1-3; 5:9; 140:3; 10:7; Prov. 1:16; Psa. 36:1).

### III. Coming to Terms with the Problem.

A. We need to review this teaching to remember sin's nature and the danger it presents.

1. We have already noticed that sin makes us objects of God's wrath (1:18; 2:5; 3:5).
2. The necessary consequence of sin is death (6:23).
3. But, it also pulls us into things that actually rob us of our freedom (therefore, of something of our image).
  - a) Paul calls it being "under sin" (3:9), an idea he later expands with other figures: it reigns over us (5:21 - βασιλεύω, *basileuō*), lords over us (6:14 - κυριεύω, *kurieuō*), takes captive (7:23 - αἰχμαλωτίζω, *aichmalōtizō*, like a POW), and enslaves (6:6 - δουλεύω, *douleuō*).
  - b) All sin is addictive (consider the behaviors in 1:28-32 from this angle).
4. Obviously, we must take sin seriously.

B. There is another consideration for church people.

1. With which group in Paul's description do we more generally identify?
2. The point is not that we claim a reliance on the law to suffice for our place before God; most of us have been taught better.
3. But, we can begin to think that, because we are Christians, have the Bible, study the Bible, and are generally not like [better than] so many around us, somehow we are immune to the problem of sin.
4. We should remember that we still have our freedom and can be lured into priorities and deeds that belie our claim of discipleship, perhaps even to the point of letting God's name be blasphemed (see 2:24).

### Conclusion

1. "What's wrong with the world?" English author G. K. Chesterton is said to have replied to an invitation by a London newspaper to answer that by saying, "I am."<sup>6</sup>
2. That's the truth. What's wrong with the world? I am, and you are, and so is everyone else.
3. Happily, Paul had more to say. As he called them to not return to such slavery (6:1-16), he reminded the Romans how they had been rescued from it to start with (6:2-4, 7). Are you "dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (6:11)?

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<sup>6</sup> That Chesterton said this has never been certainly documented. On a website devoted to Chesterton, a response to a query about it notes the lack of documentation, but also that it sounds like something Chesterton would have said. Chesterton did write a book entitled, *What's Wrong with the World?* <http://www.chesterton.org/discover-chesterton/frequently-asked-questions/wrong-with-world>. Accessed February 7, 2013.