

*“Welcome One Another
Just as Christ Has Welcomed You”*

Diocese of West Texas, Fall 2009

Optional, Supplemental Study and Reflection Session 1A
Paul and the Modern Question Regarding Homosexuality:
A Look at Romans 1:18-2:16

The Passage: New Revised Standard Version Translation

NRSV 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. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 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; 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. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools; 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.

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, 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. 26 For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, 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.

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. 29 They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 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.

2:1 Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. 2 You say, "We know that God's judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth." 3 Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? 4 Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 5 But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. 6 For he will repay according to each one's deeds: 7 to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. 9 There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek.

11 For God shows no partiality. 12 All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. 13 For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God's sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. 14 When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. 15 They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them 16 on the day

when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

A Translation for Study, with Commentary

As we have set out in the Introduction, Paul writes this letter to the Christians in Rome, not only to introduce himself to them, but to help them overcome the division that plagues them, between the Jewish and Gentile believers. His strategy for addressing the problem is not to praise them equally, but to demonstrate how both groups are under the power of Sin (and, therefore, the judgment of God). He addresses what he sees as the weaknesses of the Gentiles first: their refusal to acknowledge how the one true God is revealed in creation and in what Paul sees as the natural order of things (it is in this argument that he speaks of “unnatural” sexual practices). At the moment when the Jewish members of the community are perhaps congratulating themselves for the failings of the Gentiles, he addresses the issues that cause *them* to fall equally under the power of Sin: hypocrisy and judgmentalism. Paul is working toward Romans 3:21-26, where he will show what God has done “now” to make one community out of two.

Romans 1:18 For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and injustice [*adikia*] of those who by their injustice are suppressing the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is visible among them, for God has made it visible to them. 20 Ever since the creation of the world, the invisible things of God – his eternal power and divine nature – are clearly perceived and understood in the things he has made. So they are without excuse; 21 for, having known God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks, but they became foolish in their reasoning, and their uncomprehending hearts became darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools; 23 and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for the likeness of the image of a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

24 Therefore God turned them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged God's truth for a lie and revered and served [*latreuō*] the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen. 26 For this reason God turned them over to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, 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.

28 And since they did not think knowledge of God was something worth having, God turned them over to the kind of mind that God does not think is worth having, a mind that leads to doing improper things. 29 They were filled with every kind of injustice, evil intention, greediness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, meanness, they are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 uncomprehending, disloyal, heartless, merciless. 32 Knowing God's just requirement [*dikaiōma*] – that those who practice such things deserve to die – not only do they do them, but even applaud others who practice them.

In Rom 1:18-3:20, Paul tells the story of universal sinfulness – of Jews and Gentiles. We know from Israel's scriptures that God has acted in the past to save where only a few have been righteous or just. As Paul tells the story now, however, no one is righteous or just (3:10), for all have sinned (3:23). So, under these extreme circumstances, what will God do? Paul answers this completely in 3:21-31, which will be discussed in Study and Reflection Session 2. In the meantime, let's focus on this passage.

The logic of the passage starts with the human responsibility to know and acknowledge God as creator by submitting to God's claims on each person that transcend the claims of any creature. The problem, as Paul explains it, is that Gentiles are refusing to acknowledge the claim that God is making on their lives. They reject living in ways that show they are created in the image and likeness of

God as characterized in Gen 1:26. This happens because humans deliberately choose to serve the image of the creature rather than the image of the Creator. According to Paul's argument, God intended for humans to reflect the image of God's glory to the world. But through their intentional acts of injustice (1:18), they are preventing the world from knowing God's "truth" that humans are intended to be a reflection of God's glory and God's justice in the world. By refusing to acknowledge and serve God, they are unleashing destruction on the world as a natural consequence of their own unjust actions. Thus, the "wrath of God" in 1:18, widely used in the Torah, characterizes the destruction that humans bring on themselves through their rebellious conduct – a result of their willful turning away from God and the necessary consequence of their self-distorted existence. According to Paul, this destruction is what is now being revealed through unjust human actions.

In Paul's day, Jews linked Adam and Eve's disobedience to idolatry and assumed that sexual immorality was the logical consequence of idolatry, of which homosexuality (understood not as a sexual orientation but as a cultural practice) was a prime example (see Grieb, 28). According to Paul and other Jews of his day, the reference to the relationship between male and female in Gen 1:27 indicates the image and likeness of God that a couple ought to reflect back to the world. Thus, "Paul's logic is combined with the traditional Jewish argument that the first sin – idolatry – leads to all others" (Grieb, 28). The disobedient, willful decision for idolatry leads to the less freely chosen consequences of "dishonorable passions" (1:26). This, in turn, leads to the even less freely chosen consequence of acting in accordance with a mind that God does not think is worth having (1:28), a mind unable to discern right from wrong and even approves what is clearly wrong (see Grieb, 29).

We see the logic of this in Paul's argument. The first sin – idolatry in reverencing and serving the creature (1:25) – leads to all others. Notice that the list of vices in 1:29-31 that include homosexual actions is focused on the malign and antisocial vices associated with strong people, not with vices associated with human weakness like drunkenness and lust. Thus, the entire section of the letter is about "willful rebellion and disobedience" (Johnson, 35). "For Paul, idolatry is a disease

of human freedom not failed science. He speaks of humans 'suppressing the truth,' which suggests a conscious and willful choice." (Johnson, 33) For Paul, idolatry begins not in the mind but in the will – it is fundamentally an act of disobedience (Johnson, 34). Consequently, we may conclude that, for Paul, there seems to be no question that "homosexuality should be considered a vice that is freely chosen because of a 'perverted view of the world.'" (Johnson, 35). The logic of Paul's argument has profound ramifications for the contemporary debate over the role of homosexuals in the church.

Many Christians and Jews today would disagree with Paul's underlying assumption about the created order. In a column in the Wall Street Journal on August 28, 2009, entitled "Bridging the Gay-Evangelical Divide," social psychologist David G. Myers summarizes some of the conclusions of the American Psychological Association (APA):

This emerging professional consensus—that one's sexual orientation is a natural, enduring disposition—has gained strength from scientists who have, in recent years, discovered gay-straight differences in brain centers, fingerprint patterns and, it appears, the womb: The more biological older brothers a man has, the greater the likelihood of same-sex orientation. ... Focus on the Family now agrees with the APA on this much: 'We do not believe anyone chooses his or her same-sex attractions.'

Some of the conflict about same-sex attractions stems from disagreements about biblical texts. On one side are those who assume the literal meaning of seven proscriptive passages, especially in Leviticus and Romans. On the other are those who say that these few texts are slim pickings among the Bible's 31,103 verses and that such texts usually also condemn other actions (such as child exploitation, promiscuity or idolatry) and never a natural orientation. But biblical scholars are working to resolve the differences, as they did with earlier debates over slavery, race and gender.

Myers raises a point worthy of our consideration. If homosexual relations are part of God's natural created order throughout the animal world, as many scientists and sociologists now conclude, then what do we do with Paul's argument from "what is natural" in Rom 1:18-32?

According to Katherine Grieb:

[T]here can be honest differences of opinion about what is natural in God's created order and therefore what reflects and gives glory to God. Same-sex relationships also occur naturally throughout God's created order. Paul urges the Christians at Rome to try to discern God's will (Rom 12:2). (Grieb, 30). Grieb cites Oxford New Testament theologian Robert Morgan:

So in matters of political and sexual ethics contemporary Christians are not excused from the hard work of deciding what is right and wrong just because Paul in his day thought certain matters beyond dispute (*Romans*, 1997, 124).

Similarly, Luke Timothy Johnson observes:

The critical question for present-day Christians is not exegetical but hermeneutical – that is, what to think and do about such passages as these in light of later experience and perception. Is it the case that homosexuality is a vice that is freely chosen? Or is it...the 'natural' mode of sexual expression for a small portion of the world's population? Is homosexuality, then, as it seems to Paul, entirely a matter of *porneia* (sexual sin incompatible with the rule of God, 1 Cor 6:9-11), or is it compatible with a chaste and covenantal relationship? These are hard questions, to be sure, and not likely to be answered on the basis of Scripture texts alone but by a long and difficult process of discernment within the church... (*Johnson*, 34-35).

Whatever the result of the church's reflection on whether homosexual practice is the willful, deliberate rejection of God the creator or part of the natural order of

God's creation, the logic of Paul's primary argument in 1:18-32 stands unaffected. Human freedom is distorted when we cut ourselves off from our roots in God the creator. When we sever our relationship with God, we begin to distort or destroy all the other relationships of our lives – with our fellow human beings, the natural world, and even the objects we use.

2:1 Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are practicing the very same things. 2 You say, "We know that God's judgment on those who practice such things is in accordance with truth." 3 Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those practicing such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? 4 Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? 5 But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God's just judgment will be revealed. 6 For he will give according to each one's works [ergon]: 7 to those who, by patiently working for good, seek glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; 8 while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but injustice, there will be wrath and fury. 9 There will be anguish and distress for everyone working [ergazomai] evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, 10 but glory and honor and peace for everyone working [ergazomai] the good, the Jew first and also the Greek.

11 For God shows no partiality. 12 All who have sinned apart from Torah will also perish apart from Torah, and all who have sinned under Torah will be judged by Torah. 13 For it is not the hearers of Torah who are in right relationship with God, but the doers of Torah who will be in right relationship with God. 14 When Gentiles, not having Torah, do instinctively what Torah requires, these, though not having Torah, are a Torah to themselves. 15 They show that what Torah requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them 16 on the

day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

In 1:18-32 Paul sets a trap by enticing the Jewish Christians hearing the letter to nod in agreement with his indictment of Gentile sinfulness. They are easily led down the path of judging the moral failings of others. Then, in 2:1-16 he springs the trap on them by saying "you are practicing the very same things!"

*According to Paul, God is impartial (2:11). God will repay everyone according to their works. The Greek noun *ergon* is often translated "deeds," which is an appropriate translation. But many people often (mis)interpret Paul as emphasizing that humans are saved only by "faith" and not "works." Rom 2:6-10 is one place where it becomes clear that such an interpretation would not do justice to Paul's understanding of how salvation occurs. Similarly, by using the Greek verb *ergazomai* (2:9, 10), Paul acknowledges that humans do "work," with either good or evil consequences. God notices and will give back to each person according to those works: eternal life to those working the good; wrath and anger to those working evil. This is not entirely a future repayment by God after death (i.e. it is not simply the idea of "going to heaven or hell" after one dies). In 1:16-17 Paul has argued that the God's justice and the power of God for salvation are being revealed in the gospel. Similarly, in 1:18, he argues that destruction and the wrath of God are being revealed as a consequence of human acts of injustice. Thus, for Paul, there is a very present aspect to God's power for new and eternal life associated with working for the good. The opposite is true for the destructive powers that work through acts of evil.*

Questions for Reflection:

1. If Paul were alive today, how do you think he would diagnose the “ills” of our own society? In what ways do our actions show that we do not take God seriously as the author of the whole creation?
2. Paul’s argument against homosexuality stems from the natural order, with God understood as the author of the natural order. How does homosexuality fit into this discussion, for you? Have you always had the same opinion? Who has had the most influence on your understanding of human sexuality (parents, teachers, friends, the Bible, other reading)?