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*“Man’s Depravity & God’s Grace”*

ROMANS 1:18-3:24

MARCH 16, 2025

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## AT A GLANCE

In this week’s sermon, Pastor Brian recaps Romans 1:18-3:24. The sermon reflects on the transformative power of Romans, a book that has profoundly impacted church history and continues to change lives today. It highlights how Romans reveals humanity’s sinful state, the futility of self-righteousness, and the incredible hope found in Jesus Christ’s redeeming grace. The message calls listeners to abandon sin, trust in Christ, and embrace the righteousness God freely offers through faith.

## INTRODUCTION

When I introduced our study of Romans in July of 2022, I was optimistic that Romans would be transformative for our church. I had no idea how transformative it would be. And why should I be surprised? In that sermon I spoke of how transformative Romans was in the life of John Calvin, Martin Luther, Augustine, Jonathan Wesley, and Jonathan Edwards. These are some of the most impactful men in the history of the church and their lives were profoundly impacted by this letter from Paul.

The fact is most of us came to faith aided at least in part by Romans. How many of you when you were told of your desperate need for Jesus were quoted *Romans 3:23*, “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*”? And how many were relieved by *Romans 6:23*, “*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*”? How many came to understand the love of God through *Romans 5:8*, “*God demonstrated His love for us in this, that while we were still sinners Christ died for us*”?

## GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The reality is Romans has to be one of the most impactful letters ever written and the Lord has used Paul’s writing to change the world and change the lives of billions of people. I said in my sermon that day that I had high expectations! Great anticipation that the Lord is going to use the study of Romans to transform Wildwood. And my goodness has He!

I told the congregation that day that I anticipated, “some of you will, like Jonathan Wesley, feel your heart warmed for the very first time at the preaching of Romans. You, like he, have served on mission trips, you’ve volunteered in the church for years, yet soon you will come to realize you have never truly believed the Gospel yourself.” Check. I know of at least one couple for whom this is true, and another man. I have no doubt there are others I do not know of.

Then I said, “Others of you will like Augustine, approach this study mired in sexual sin and lust for material gain. You will hear the Lord call you out of darkness and into marvelous light.” Check. We had a men’s conference one year into this study, August 2023, called, “You are not alone.” It was a conference to deal openly with pornography. I heard from so many men about how the Lord has worked in their hearts these last couple of years in this regard.

I said, “Some will, like Martin Luther, finally be set free from the legalistic pursuit of righteousness. You will finally and fully come to understand that the righteousness by which you are to live is the righteousness that God gives you through faith.” Check. Time after time I heard from you, “This has helped me love Jesus and His Word.”

But I knew that not everyone would respond positively to the preaching of Romans. I predicted, even prophesied, “Some will undoubtedly shriek at the doctrines Paul sets before you. Some will hear of the depravity of man, or the unconditional election of God, or the call to abstain from judging others over matters of personal conviction and these will not find a warm welcome in your heart.” Sadly, check. I need not say more.

## TO GOD BE THE GLORY

I concluded my introduction with this powerful proclamation, “The Word of God is powerful – it encourages and it exposes. It bestows life and demands response. It will draw some so close to God they can hardly stand while it causes others to stumble. Come what may, God will be glorified through the faithful preaching of His Word.” And I can proclaim today, “To God be the glory! Great things He has done!”

Many of you joined us somewhere in the middle of Romans so for the next five weeks I will recap the entire book, using the same framework I did in the overview, adding new insights and reflections having now arrived on the other side.

## ROMANS 1:18-25

**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. <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. <sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> 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.**

## HOW CAN THAT BE FAIR?

Some people wonder how it is fair that God judges people, “innocent people” who have never heard the Gospel. How can that be fair? What Paul tells us right off the bat as he is describing the woeful condition of mankind is that there are no innocent victims of God’s judgment.

Everyone **suppresses the truth** of God. The whole creation testifies that there is a creator God, yet man worships anything and everything but Him. Man worships creation itself over God. Man, in his sin, is bent toward worshipping creation, including nature, instead of worshipping the Creator.

This is the woeful state of man. Paul continues his description in **verses 1:26-32 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.**

**They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips,<sup>30</sup> slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,<sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.<sup>32</sup> Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.**

People argue, If God exists, why is there evil in the world? The answer to that is simple. Man has rejected God. This is nothing new. It's been true of every generation since Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.

We need to reckon with the fact that people sin willfully. It's neither ignorance nor oppression that causes people to sin. Paul makes it clear, every person sins willfully. They suppress the truth. They exchange the truth about God for a lie. They exchange the glory of God to worship idols.

For the created object to have no knowledge of, and ascribe no glory to, its creator proves that humanity is hopelessly lost. All of creation obeys Him while man rejects Him.

### DO YOU SUPPOSE, O MAN

In **verses 1-3 of chapter 2**, Paul switches gears a little, perhaps to bring it home to this audience. **Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.<sup>2</sup> We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.<sup>3</sup> Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?**

I can just imagine some in the audience in Rome listening to Romans 1 nodding their head with a smug grin on their face and their arms crossed, leaning back in their seats, like, “Yeah, Paul, get ‘em! The world is an awful place full of awful people!”

And now Paul brings it home to the religious hypocrite. Paul shows us that just as idolatry is condemned, so is religious hypocrisy. Those who have their pet sins they choose to ignore but condemn other people for theirs, Paul asks, “Do you think you will escape God's judgment?”

Paul warns them their judgment is coming, too, in **verses 4-5 Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of 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.**

What a warning! There are people who live in self-righteous judgment of the world around them. They do not realize that while they presume upon the kindness of God, meant to lead them to repentance, they are instead storing up wrath for themselves on the day of judgement. It is a tragic reality that many religious people will face. It's also something they refuse to hear.

### A MATTER OF THE HEART

Paul concludes Romans 2 with a reality check. He says in **verses 28-29 For no one is a Jew who is merely one outwardly, nor is circumcision outward and physical.<sup>29</sup> But a Jew is one inwardly, and circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter. His praise is not from man but from God.**

Circumcision was never merely about cutting the flesh. It was always about identifying oneself with the Holy Creator in one's heart. It was about following the Spirit, not simply the letter of the Law. Although following the letter of the Law might earn you approval from men, it might make you look like a good and noble person, following the Spirit is what earns you approval from God. Not that you can earn it, as we're about to see in chapter 3, but it is what *receives* His approval.

In **3:1-8** Paul refutes the notion that the Law, the Prophets, and God's choosing of Israel were all for nothing. The fact that Israel rejected her God in no way nullifies God's faithfulness.

### WHAT GOOD IS THE LAW?

Let's pick up in **Romans 3:9-18** **What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,** <sup>10</sup> as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; <sup>11</sup> no one understands; no one seeks for God. <sup>12</sup> All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." <sup>13</sup> "Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive." "The venom of asps is under their lips." <sup>14</sup> "Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness." <sup>15</sup> "Their feet are swift to shed blood; <sup>16</sup> in their paths are ruin and misery, <sup>17</sup> and the way of peace they have not known." <sup>18</sup> "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

Lest we sugar-coat our true natures, we're utterly hopeless to save ourselves. There is no good in mankind, no fear of God before their eyes. **None is righteous, no not one.**

Paul's final words to describe the helpless estate of man? **3:20 For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.**

That put the last nail in the coffin of any sense of self-righteousness, doesn't it? It is impossible for man to be justified, which means to be in right relationship, to be at peace with God, by observing laws and living rightly.

Which begs the question, "What good was the Law?" And the answer is that the Law reveals how bad we really are. The Law is like a mirror. It cannot make us clean, but it certainly can show us how filthy we really are.

And that's a good thing because we cannot appreciate the good news until we understand how bad the bad news really is.

You and I and every single person who has ever lived have rejected God, worshipping any number of idols instead, including the idol of self-righteousness.

Some will argue, "I'm no idolator!" What was King Saul's guilt? In 1 Samuel 15:23 we read, "*For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.*" Catch this and don't miss it, to presume upon God is the same as if you worshipped false gods.

We have no excuse. We have no rebuttal. We have nothing coming but God's righteous judgment. No one is righteous. The Law cannot make us righteous. We are already condemned. Except, that is, by faith in Jesus Christ!

### THIS IS WHERE THE NEWS GETS REALLY GOOD

In **Romans 3:21-24** the story takes a turn and the Gospel becomes really, really good news! **But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—** <sup>22</sup> **the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:** <sup>23</sup> **for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,** <sup>24</sup> **and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...**

That is sweet as honey! That is balm to the soul. That is a cold glass of water on a sweltering summer day. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. No matter how much you have tried to make yourself acceptable to God, your heart is desperately wicked and broken.

Mankind is totally depraved. There is no innate goodness in any man, woman, or child. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. All of us in the words of that Great Awakening father Jonathan Edwards, are sinners in the hands of an angry God.

And yet God made a way for us to be redeemed. While we were yet His enemies... *“Christ died for the ungodly.” Romans 5:6* Relationship with God can be restored but it is not by might nor by power, nor by effort, nor by works of righteousness. Only by faith in Jesus are we redeemed.

Sinner, have you grown weary of your sin? How about of your works of self-righteousness? Is there any fear of God before your eyes? Any hunger and thirst for righteousness? I invite you to enter God’s presence through the only doors opened before you: the Way, the Truth, and the Life...Jesus Christ our Lord. The One who died for your sin.

Lay down your sin at the feet of the Savior. Take up His free gift of grace and find peace with our merciful and righteous God as one redeemed by the blood of Jesus.

It is the blood of Jesus poured out for us and his body broken for us that we symbolize in the elements of the Lord’s Supper. Do you know Jesus as Savior? Do you submit to Him as Lord? He has taken your sin upon Himself and draped you in His righteousness.

#### HAVE MERCY ON ME, THE SINNER

If you do not know Jesus this way, I invite you to submit to Him even now, right where you are. Jesus told a parable in the hearing of the religious hypocrites of His day, which we read in Luke 18:9-14. A pharisee and a tax collector go into the temple. The pharisee was proud of his religious achievements. The tax collector prayed a simple, contrite prayer from the heart, “Lord have mercy on me, the sinner.” Jesus says it was that man who went home justified. Are you ready to pray that simple prayer from the heart? “Lord, have mercy on me, the sinner.”

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