

# Romans 1:19-24

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[ 0 : 00 ] Do be seated and turn to Romans 1. As you're turning there let me just flag up again that a week tomorrow we've got the why business matters to God and the next session is on the divine imperative of wealth creation.

Why making money is a good thing and so we don't often talk in that way but I think Richard will be really fresh and helpful on the call. So that's next Monday at 8pm. If you've not signed up please do sign up and if you missed the first session it's online and if you want to invite other people everyone is welcome. It's on Zoom.

So we're in verses 19 to 23 this morning. Sometimes people say to me the gospel is unfair.

It seems unfair. Interestingly they don't think that it's unfair when God is rescuing people.

Nobody argues about that. Nobody's got a problem with that. But they do have a problem that God doesn't rescue some people. They think it's unfair that God damns some sinners.

[ 1 : 21 ] That jars our brain a bit doesn't it? Maybe that's what you're thinking. You don't like to hear what God has to say about himself in this passage.

There are other passages that are much more wonderful. Why don't we concentrate on those words? It's Valentine's Day isn't it? Somebody asked me if I'm preaching a Valentine's Day sermon. Yes. Alright. This is a Valentine's Day sermon. Why don't we preach on love more Levi? We need a bit more of that. That's the kind of God we want to hear about.

And that's the kind of God we want God to be. Something in this passage in Romans 1 jars with us. Do you remember it from last week?

For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. We don't want to hear that.

[ 2 : 20 ] We can't see how God is glorified in that. How we can be thankful for that. And so what do we do? Well God has already revealed what we do. We suppress the truth.

We attempt to hold it down. It's like the recycling isn't it? Our bin isn't big enough for the recycling. Neither is yours. And so you are four or five days away from the bin men coming.

And what do you have to do in the blue recycling bin? You have to suppress it. You have to try and stamp on it or get in it and push it down. To hold it down. That's what we do with this truth about God's wrath.

We want to walk away from it. And so when we hear Romans 1 read, we know that we're hearing something solemn. And we know that we're hearing something that could be said is grim.

And when we respond to this truth, we respond to that truth by pushing it down and suppressing it. It goes on, isn't it, to say we pervert the worship of God.

[ 3 : 22 ] And then we pervert human dignity and human relationships. It's solemn. It's grim. But it's more than that.

Because we know that Romans 1 doesn't just refer to Rome in first century. We know that when we hear this passage, it refers to the timelessness of the word of God. And so we know today that it's as timely for our generation in 21st century Ealing as it was in first century Rome.

Because our culture and our generation, it tells us of how we've perverted the worship of the living God. It tells us of how we've perverted human relationships, not only in terms of sexuality.

And Paul is revealing through the word of God that God is righteous and everything that God does is righteous. He's right. He's in the right. He does what is right. And what God demands of you and me is he demands that righteousness.

And he reveals to you and I the righteousness that we don't have. And so from verse 18 to the end of this chapter, he's explaining to us the deceitfulness, how we get conned by unrighteousness.

[ 4 : 42 ] And he's got these two words that he's opening up in verse 18. There's ungodliness there and there's unrighteousness. And it seems to me that he takes that first word ungodliness and he explains what that is from verses 19 to 23.

And then he takes this word unrighteousness in our attitude towards humanity and one another. And so 19 to 23 are Godward and 24 to 32 are kind of horizontal towards us as humans. And I want you to really see clearly that he's not only explaining this kind of unrighteousness in terms of sexuality. Because he lists 21 other sins.

That show you how we've perverted human dignity and human relationships. And he's explaining to you and I the seriousness of that. The seriousness of not having the righteousness that God demands.

Because remember God is righteous and everything he does is righteous and he demands righteousness. And not only do we not have that righteousness, we are possessed with an unrighteousness.

[ 5 : 52 ] There's debit in our account. And so when you and I look at this big question of the fairness of God damning sinners, Paul reaches the conclusion in Romans that you and I are without excuse.

Every single one of us. Every man, every woman, every boy and every girl. And we stand before God inexcusable. Inexcusable in our rejection of himself.

And in the way that we've wrecked and perverted all that is human. In terms of dignity and relationships. And so what Paul will tell us is how God is fair and righteous and just and...

I'm right. In damning sinners. I've got three points for you this morning. And it's quite structured, alright. And so I'll try and point that out to you.

So first of all, here's point number one. Every person knows God. Every person knows God. It's a bit of a shock, isn't it?

[ 6 : 59 ] Verse 21. Although they knew God. And that's what the text says. Every person knows God. But in sin, we refuse to respond to him as God.

And so every person is without excuse in the presence of God. On the wrath of God. Listen again to verses 19 and 20 and 21.

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 his divine nature, have been clearly perceived. They've been understood ever since the creation of the world. And the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. You live in God's world. So you're 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. That is a really solemn word, isn't it?

[ 8 : 04 ] His statement is that every single human being in this world. Every single human being in your street, in your workplace, in your school. Knows God. It's really plain.

I've revealed myself to everyone through the created world. But they walk away from that truth. They turn away. They suppress that truth.

They crush it down. And so I think there's four things that need to be unpacked in this first point. I told you it was quite structured, okay? So first of all, every person knows God because God has revealed himself.

Because God has revealed himself. It's not a question of you and I working this out by ourselves. It's not a question of your intellectual ability. It's not a question of what you're able to achieve. God revealed himself. God has showed himself. God shows himself. He's unveiled something of himself. And verse 19 is really interesting because it states this and the consequences of this in a couple of ways.

[ 9 : 10 ] It says, doesn't it? He's revealed himself to them. Manifested himself to them. And he's also revealed himself in them. Can you see that? Revealed himself to them.

And in them. What does that mean? In other words, he's saying it is plain.

It is plain that God has taken this step to show himself to all created beings. What does it mean when it says that he's revealed himself in them? I think to cut a long story short and the commentators go round and round on this.

It means that they get it. They get it. They see it and they know. Because every one of them suppresses.

To them and in them. They suppress it. So he's saying he revealed himself. But the second thing under this point, every person knows God. He explains how that is.

[10:15] Because in verse 20, can you see what it says there? It says, for his invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and his divine nature, have been clearly perceived.

They've been plainly shown. Ever since the creation of the world. He says this creation of the universe, the things that have been made, demonstrates to us that there is a God and there is an unveiling of God.

John Piper's got a really wonderful comment on this. He says, literally, the words that you have here, the things that have been made, are where we get the English word poem from.

So let's just think about that for a minute. What does God do? He makes himself known. He makes himself evident. He made the world.

He creates the world like a potter or a sculptor or a poet. Except he created out of nothing. Do you remember the catechism? So in verse 20, when it says God is understood through what he has made, that word, what has been made, it's one word in the original, and it's the word from which we get the English word poem.

[11:36] So the world and everything in it is God's work of art. What's the point of this world? The point is that this world is a poem.

This world is a work of art manifesting the glory of God. This world is a poem. In which there's design and intention and wisdom and power.

And so the wind might create a letter in the sand, but not a poem. Because God acted and God planned and God designed and God crafted. He created and made.

And in doing that, verse 19, God says, he made himself evident to all mankind. So this universe in which we live, this world in which we live and enjoy, is a poem about God.

It's a powerful way to describe it. To pick up that kind of powerful significance of what God does in creation. Because he created all things by the word of his power.

[12:40] By his speech. And so what we do is we live in this universe. We walk around, if I can put it like this, in the text of God's revelation. You are in God's poem.

You are called into being by his word. And this whole created glorious craft of his. It's a wonderful way, I think, of speaking of this whole universe as a poem for his glory.

And so you and I, we live in the text of God's art. We live in the text of God's craft. That's why I think C.S. Lewis, he picks up that thought, doesn't he?

How was Narnia coming into existence? Do you remember that? Aslan sings, doesn't he? Narnia into existence. It's the same thought.

I think he got it from Romans 1. And it shows us what God is saying to us. That every person knows God. You live in God's story. Because God has revealed himself.

[13:44] And he revealed himself in the text of this great work of art. Which you live and move and have your being in. The third thing in terms of everyone knowing God.

The text is explaining what do we know from being in God's world. From being in God's poem. What is it that we actually know about knowing God? We could spend months here. That he is the creator.

But specifically, can you see what it says? It says his invisible attributes. That is that God is himself invisible.

He's invisible to our eyes. The created world tells us that. And the created world tells us that there is an eternal power. And a divine nature. And again, they're really interesting words.

His eternal power speaks of his alwaysness. The powerful alwaysness of God. Not like clouds, you know, they move across the sky, don't they?

[14:49] Not like the sun that comes up and goes down. But the eternalness of God. His powerful being that stands at the very nature and heart of everything.

That he has created this world by the word of his power. And his deity. The word speaks about that, his divine nature.

We talk about theism, don't we? Which is a belief in God. And the work of God. Being theistic. And so what does God show us about himself?

In the fabric of this created world. Made by his word. It's a song of his glory. That is being revealed. It's a general revelation.

That's the theological term. I really don't like that term. I think it's a bad description. It's very engineerish.

[15:48] General revelation. It's something much more wonderful than that, isn't it? What does creation tell you? And what does creation tell your friends? It tells you that God is there.

That God makes and God creates. And he reveals. And we cannot see him. And he reveals to you in creation that he is eternally powerful. And he reveals that he is God.

So that the created world shows to you the godness of God. And it is stunning. And it is majestic. And it is a revelation of himself.

And that's why general revelation. Pound shops are called general stores, aren't they? You don't want to go in them. General revelation. We need to think of a better term. Of course we know, don't we?

It's general revelation as opposed to special revelation which we get in the Bible. But when we speak of the general revelation of God, that is his eternal power.

[16:50] His goodness. The fourth thing we see in this kind of knowing God is that our sinful rebellion suppresses it. Everyone you know and you suppress it.

That's sin. That's what we do. We stamp on it. We turn a blind eye to it. We pretend it's not there. That it's not crying out to us. And we live in God's poem whilst denying the author.

We say he's not there. We say this is not his work. It's not his art. It's not his poem. It's not his song. And I will not respond to it. And I will not enter into the malady of it. And I will not put my voice to sing his praise. And so we suppress it and we do not honour him. We do not glorify him.

And yet he says, God says to you, it is plain. And it's clear. God is not like Peter Pan, is he? You know it's Peter Pan, isn't it?

[18:01] I think it's Peter Pan. That every time I say, you don't believe in fairies, what happens? Is that right? I got this right? What happens?

A fairy dies, isn't it? And so you run around the school playground when you were allowed to go to school saying, I don't believe in fairies, I don't believe in fairies because all the fairies have died. God isn't like that. None of us live like that.

The policeman stops you. You're driving on the A40. The policeman pulls you over. And you're winding down the window. And as he comes to speak to you, you say, it's alright, I don't believe in policemen.

Try it. I don't believe in the traffic police. It doesn't change anything, does it? The angry atheist who says, I don't believe in God and rails against God.

It doesn't change anything. It's just suppressing the truth. Why are you angry with a God you don't believe in? Everyone knows God.

[19:02] Let me try and, secondly, let's see this, that every sinner rejects the worship of God. Every one of us outside of Christ rejects the worship of God. We refuse to give him glory.

We don't honour him as we should. He says in verse 21, although they knew God, although they knew God, they did not honour him as God. All gave thanks to him. Here's something that we did not do.

We did not worship of God. Outside of Christ, without his grace, we don't naturally worship God. And we refuse to be thankful for this glorious work of art. Through the text in which we move.

We hold out. We're resentful. We're angry. We refuse to take part in any song. We won't join in the singing. Martin Luther speaks of that as a sin of omission.

Something we leave out. We refuse to do it. Verse 18, we suppress the truth. We hold it down. We hold it back. We become silent.

[20:08] So instead of singing God's praises, we just shut up. And we say nothing. And we become mute. And quiet. And so isn't that ironic?

Is that people speak about, well, where was God when dot, dot, dot? I cried out to God. But actually, the Bible teaches us reality. That it's not actually God who is silent, is it? It's we that are silent.

The created world, Romans 8 teaches us, is groaning and crying out towards his creator. The creatures that are silent are us.

In our sin, as it comes before God, we just don't worship. Or we just don't bother.

We see the evidence of that, don't we? All around us in our culture, in our country, every single one of us. Some of us may do that with fear and trembling. But we still suppress the truth. Many people

do it brazenly.

[ 21 : 08 ] They couldn't care less. But God is saying that's what every single one of us does. We sin by trying to leave God out of our lives. But God is saying more to us than that.

He's saying more to us than just that we leave him out. That's not all. There's another thing, isn't there? The worship of God. Not only are we guilty of a sin of omission, but as Luther rightly tells us, that sin of omission, it takes root and it fertilizes, and it grows and it blossoms into actual sin.

A sin of commission. And so we turn away from the living God, Romans 1 teaches us, and yet we turn to other things. And we worship other things.

In fact, we worship anything. We'll worship birds. We'll worship four-footed animals. We'll worship creepy crawlies. We'll worship stuff we've made with our own hands.

We'll worship sport. We'll worship money. We'll worship our reputation. We'll worship our own control. Even though we know that the very stuff that we make with our own hands will rot and is corruptible, and in the end it'll come to nothing.

[ 22 : 33 ] But we'll worship it. Anything, anything, anything but God. We'll put anything in the place of this glorious God and the glory that's due to his name, rather than worship the one who's put words in our mouths, who's written songs for us to sing.

We'll worship anything. We'll worship anything we can find but him. And so C.S. Lewis again is right, isn't it? When people stop worshipping God, they don't worship nothing. They worship everything.

Do you see the seriousness of it? Let me point out to you these dark exchanges. Look at the exchange verse 23. There's two that happen there. They exchange the glory of the immortal God, the God who never dies.

They exchange the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. That's dark exchange number one. Dark exchange number two is verse 25. They exchange the truth about God for a lie.

They worship and serve the creature rather than the creator who is blessed forever. We could talk all day about that, couldn't we? So we see, number one, we all know something about God.

[ 23 : 47 ] Number two, we reject the worship of God. And number three, point number three, let's see the drastic effect that this has upon us. He says that although they knew God, although they knew God, they did not honour.

They did not honour him as God or give thanks to him. But they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened. They claimed to be wise, but they became fools and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Do you see the effect that it has on us? We become futile in our thinking. The word futile, it could be translated as vain, it could also be empty, but actually the best translation is pointless.

When we know and we follow this course of thinking, we reject and our thinking becomes pointless. It's what Francis Schaeffer described as falling below the line of despair.

We start living our lives below the line of despair because life becomes pointless. Where is it going? What is it for?

[ 25 : 16 ] And life becomes pointless when we move away from the worship of God. We move into pointlessness. That's what he says. We become futile in our thinking, swallowed up by this line of despair.

He secondly says, our hearts, our foolish hearts, our senseless hearts have become darkened. We end up living our own, our whole inner selves in darkness.

And our whole inner self gropes around in the darkness, trying to find something solid in life to cling on to. Some way that we can make sense of life, trying to find a way to make life whole, and we never find it, do we?

Because we're groping in the dark, and so we're always looking for the thing, the piece of the jigsaw that will make sense of life, and yet we're adamant that it cannot be God.

Thirdly, we stand up in that pointlessness and blindness, and we say, don't we, we're so smart. We live in a culture which thinks it's so wise.

[ 26 : 22 ] We are so wise. But the Bible says actually we're fools. Can you just see that there's two times in this passage where Paul says the fundamental root problem with the human race is to do with what we make of the glory of God.

That's the big issue. In verse 21, it says, even though they knew God, they did not glorify him as God.

That's the fundamental problem in your life and my life. What's the big problem in the UK? It's that we do not acknowledge and value and treasure and honour and savour, or make much of the greatest value in the universe the glory of God.

And the Bible says that is our wickedness. That is our disease. That is our great issue. It's mutiny against God. And then verse 23, Paul puts it another way.

He says, we exchange the glory of the incorruptible God for an image. That's the problem in the universe. The great problem of the universe concerns what human beings are doing with the glory of God.

[ 27 : 37 ] The big issue in your life and the big issue in our culture and in this country and in this century and in every century and in every nation of the world.

That when Paul goes to describe the depth of the human problem and the sinfulness of our condition, just notice, he does not begin with sexual sin. In verse 24 and 27.

Or the list of verses 29 to 31. He deals with the big issue. It's this. What do you make of the glory of God? And so this morning, let me ask you that before we get to any of the kind of sins.

Do you magnify and treasure the glory of God above all things? Or do you belittle it and prefer other things and exchange it for created things?

The issues that swirl around the glory of God and the worship of God as we sinners try to work it out, that God has revealed enough of himself in what we mistakenly call general revelation.

[ 28 : 55 ] And God has revealed enough to every one of us to leave us all with that excuse. But he's not revealed enough in the world, in the created world, to show you how to find him.

How to find the righteousness that he requires of you. And the righteousness that he offers freely to you in Christ. Here's the seriousness of unrighteousness.

But we thank God, don't we? We thank God that he's revealed more of himself than just what we see in this world.

We thank God that he has spoken and he has revealed to us his word to direct us. We thank God for the word of God.

But we thank God most for the pinnacle of his revelation when he reveals the word incarnate. The word made flesh. The Lord Jesus Christ who steps in and stands there to tell us in a special way all that we need to know about God.

[ 30 : 06 ] And he tells you and I where that righteousness is to be found because it comes freely to us in Christ. And so we thank God then.

And we glorify God for all he reveals about himself most of all. And we thank God for the word of God made flesh. and we pray, Lord, give us grace that we might know you and that we might honour you and that we might give thanks to you.

Let's pray. Amen.