

Idols, Truth, and the Power of God

Romans 1:16-25

Sermon for May 1 2022

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Introduction

Today we are looking at Question 18 of the New City Catechism.

You'll find it printed in many different languages in your bulletin.

I will read the question, and then let's read the answer together.

Question 18: Will God Allow Our Disobedience and Idolatry to Go Unpunished?

No, every sin is against the sovereignty, holiness, and goodness of God, and against his righteous law, and God is righteously angry with our sins and will punish them in his just judgment both in this life, and in the life to come.

Hear now the Word of the Lord.

Romans 1:16-25

16 For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ.

It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes--the Jew first and also the Gentile.

17 This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith.

As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life."

18 But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness.

19 They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them.

20 For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.

21 Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused.

22 Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools.

23 And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles.

24 So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies.

25 They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen

Together we read Isaiah 40:8:

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever."

Let's pray together.

Father in heaven, we come to you because you are the source of life and truth. Jesus, we worship because you are full of mercy and love. Holy Spirit, please open our hearts and minds to be transformed by the word of God.

Amen.

Let's begin by looking at Verse 18.

"God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

I want to focus on the word suppress. In English the word suppress means to hold back or hold down. Paul is saying in verse 18 that there is truth, but people suppress the truth. How do they hold back or hold down the truth? "By their wickedness." Denying the truth is not only something we do in our mind. Our sinful actions blind us to the truth.

When I got to college I began drinking and chasing girls. A few months after that started, I decided there was no God. I didn't realize then how my behavior was connected to my atheism. But there was a connection. The evidence of God's existence and character are abundantly clear in creation. As a child I learned in church about God's character and moral law. In college those things I learned came into conflict with my sinful behavior. I had to make a choice, right? I could respond to God's voice in my heart telling me it was wrong to get drunk and chase girls. Or I could suppress God's voice and his truth.

Let's use this as an example.

The truth of the moral law is written on all our hearts. The truth of God's character is written all over creation. God exists and made everything and is king over everything. I knew my behavior in college was wrong. God's moral law was in conflict with my behavior. I wanted to continue drinking and chasing girls, so I had to suppress two truths. The truth about God's existence and God's moral law.

Do you see the connection?

Paul is saying in verse 18 that the weight of our sinful behavior suppresses the truth. My atheism was the result of my wicked behavior. Here is another example. There is a Christian singer that I really like. Several years ago he cheated on his wife. They got divorced. This man did not repent of his sin. Instead, he announced that he didn't believe in God anymore. He left his wife and he left God. This man used to sing beautiful songs about Jesus and the truth in the Bible.

What changed?

Did God change? No.

Did the truth change? No.

This man changed. He committed a serious sin. Then, to suppress the guilt and shame he felt, he denied the truth about God. Look with me at verses 19 and 20.

"19 They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them.

20 For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God."

I don't think I can add anything useful to what Paul says in verses 19-20. I will only say this. Human beings can make some amazing things. We have created phones, spaceships, artwork, and music. The things we create are increasingly complex and amazing. However, who made the silicon, aluminum, and copper in this computer? God made it. Who

made the smart brains in the men and women who designed this computer? God made their brains. When you look at the beauty of nature or the complexity of technology, you are seeing the truth about God. You can suppress that truth and deny it. But it remains true, even when our idols confuse our minds.

Verse 21 and 22 say:

"21 Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused.

22 Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools."

Worship and giving thanks are good for our souls because they are idolatry antidotes. Why does God want us to worship him and give him thanks? Is God self-centered and egotistical? Of course not. He knows that we will worship and thank whatever our heart values. This month and next month many people will graduate from high school and college. Our son David will graduate from high school in June. Imagine the speech that a student will give at the graduation ceremony this month. What would you think if she took all the credit for her accomplishments in school? If she did not thank anyone for helping her? That would not be good. It would show that her heart was self-absorbed and egotistical. A student can learn nothing without a teacher. She should honor and thank her teachers and the faculty who helped her.

On Sunday nights in this room, we honor and thank our Creator. We remind ourselves that we can do nothing without our Lord and Savior. The sin of idolatry causes our hearts to focus on ourselves and our desires. Worship reminds us to thank the one true God who gives us every blessing. It's important to participate in worship frequently. Because worship helps us keep our hearts focused on the truth rather than lies.

Verse 23 "And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles."

I was teaching the Bible lesson at our English ministry on Monday. We were talking about the golden calf that God's people made by the mountain of Sinai in the book of Exodus. I taught the English students the vocabulary word "idol." I showed them this picture, of people worshiping these idols. I asked the class, "Do you think is this good?" One of the students, who is not a Christian, understood. She said, "That is silly, because those people made the statues. Statues cannot be God." This student perceived the same truth that Paul is talking about in verse 23 of today's text. It is foolish for created beings like us to worship created things.

God made you. God made the universe. God made money and work and birds and animals. When we worship things that God made, we are exchanging the truth for a lie. That's what the people did by the mountain of Sinai. They

worshipped a golden calf and said "you are the god who rescued us from Egypt!" That was a lie. An offensive lie that was deeply hurtful to the heart of God. Because God alone rescued them from Egypt.

We do the same thing when we give our hearts to something made by God. What are you tempted to give your heart to? Where do you look for safety, happiness, or escape? Be careful, because even good things become idols when our hearts value them too much. Think of a man who does not feel like a success in his work. He deeply wants a promotion. He wants to be the supervisor over other employees, to be called manager or director. He thinks in his heart, "when I am a supervisor, then people will respect me." To get that promotion at work, he works extra hours. He neglects his family, and exercise, and prayer. He tells small lies at work, to improve his reputation with the boss. Because of the stress and anxiety from pursuing this promotion, he starts drinking more alcohol. This affects the quality of his sleep and his work. Why are all these things happening? Because his heart has focused on getting a promotion at work as the most important thing. You see my friends, idols demand a sacrifice. This man will sacrifice many things in pursuit of his heart's goal.

What about you?

If you are not sure about the idols in your life, you can ask yourself these questions. Am I spending too much money on something? Am I giving something too much of my time? Am I defensive and angry if someone asks me about my behavior? Where does my mind drift in quiet moments? Do I ever say, "I will only feel happy when I have this." Do I say, "I will only feel safe when I have this." Ask the Holy Spirit to show you the truth about what is in our hearts. We need the Spirit's help because we lie to ourselves, and our idols lie to us. But God honors our free will. He allows us to sin and hurt ourselves. We see this in verse 24.

Verse 24 "So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies."

God could have stopped Adam and Eve. God is all-powerful and could have prevented them from eating the fruit. Instead, God watched to see whether their hearts would be loyal to him or to their own desires. God wanted to see if they would believe the truth or listen to the lies of Satan. As you know, they chose to listen to Satan. They trusted their sinful hearts instead of God. God allows us to make these choices, because he did not make us slaves or robots. Without Christ, we are enslaved to the desires of our hearts.

The author CS Lewis wrote this about people who are not saved by Jesus: "they enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved." It is a lie that independence from God will make us happy. We want freedom, like Adam and Eve, to do whatever we want. But we use our freedom to hurt ourselves and other

people. God allows our sin to bring suffering into our lives, so we see the truth. The answer to our catechism question today also addresses this: "God is righteously angry with our sins and will punish them in his just judgment both in this life, and in the life to come." That's the bad news, that Paul explained in verse 18.

Verse 18 "God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness."

I mentioned the time that God's people made a golden calf and bowed down to worship it. They said to the golden idol, "you are the god that rescued us from Egypt." If you were God in that situation, would you be angry? Of course you would. His people were giving their hearts to a false god. They gave their physical gold to make the idol, and that was an expression of their heart. Whatever we give our time and money to is revealing. It reveals what our hearts value the most. God gave us our mind, our body, our time, our money. He alone deserves our worship and devotion. Do you think God is right to be angry when we give our hearts, bodies, money, and time to idols? Yes, of course he is.

God is jealous for our affections.

That might sound strange, because we think jealousy is a bad thing. But if a wife sees her husband spending a lot of time with another woman, how will she feel? She will feel jealous, and angry, because her husband is giving his time and his heart to another woman. This wife is right to be jealous and angry. When God talks about our idolatry in the Bible, he describes it as adultery. Because we give our hearts to someone else.

Paul is telling us this bad news so the gospel will make sense. The word gospel means good news. We cannot understand good news without the bad news. To see the amazing grace of Christ's sacrifice for your sin, you first must see your sin clearly. That is what Paul is doing here in his letter to the Romans. He's being very direct and honest about our human situation. Because people have exchanged the truth for a lie, they need unvarnished truth to shake them out of their belief of the lie. God wants us to see our deep need for a savior, so we will cry out "God help me! God save me from my sin!" When we say that, we are ready to hear the gospel. Let's look at the good news in verses 16 and 17.

16 For I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes--the Jew first and also the Gentile.


17 This Good News tells us how God makes us right in his sight. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith. As the Scriptures say, "It is through faith that a righteous person has life."

Notice a few things about this good news that Paul describes. "It is the power of God at work." We do not save ourselves. God alone rescued the people from Egypt. God alone kept them alive in the desert. God alone can save us from our sin and idolatry. This salvation came first to the Jewish people in Israel. But many of them suppressed the truth about the death and resurrection of Jesus. They denied the power of the miracles done by Jesus. They rejected the Messiah and the truth about how people can be saved. Anyone can be saved, including Gentiles, by faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is what verse 17 tells us.

God is right to be angry about our sin and idolatry. That is the bad news we've been talking about today. But the good news is this: God poured out his righteous anger on his son Jesus. Instead of punishing us for our sin, God punished his innocent son Jesus. When we put our faith and trust in Jesus instead of any created thing, the power of God begins to work. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes.

Let's pray now together, in the power of Jesus' name. Heavenly Father, your anger and love can be hard for us to understand. But the cross helps us understand. You are right to be angry about our sin and idolatry. It seems strange that an innocent man like Jesus had to die for sin, because he never sinned. You poured out your anger on Jesus instead of us. That is why our salvation is amazing grace. We understand how much you love us when we look at the cross. Please help us remember your love this week so our hearts are not tempted by any false god. We pray this in the name of Jesus.

Amen.

 One Voice Fellowship