GOD’S RIGHTEOUS JUDGMENT

Romans 1:18-3:20
Key Verse: 2:6

“God will give to each person according to what he has done.”

Today, we want to study Romans 1:18-3:20. This is a long Bible passage. It concerns the judgment of God against the sinfulness of man. No one likes to think about judgment. At the time of judgment, all human beings become very creative in making excuses. But may God give us the courage to study this passage as it is until we can understand one thing: All mankind is accountable to God for what we have done and what we will do. There is no escaping God’s righteous standard of judgment, by which he judges the whole world. May God help us to stop making excuses for our sins and rebellion. Instead, may we repent and come to God as we are, seeking his mercy and grace. Repentance before God’s righteous standard is the only way that sinners can receive God’s praise.

I. The wrath of God is being revealed (1:18-32)

Look at verse 18. “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” Verse 18 describes an unfortunate reality of the world we live in. God and man are not at peace. Indeed, God and man are in a terrible conflict. It is so terrible that God’s wrath is being poured out from heaven on man. It is so terrible that mankind, God’s creation, seeks to suppress the truth of God in order to indulge in every kind of wickedness. Verses 18-32 outline the nature of this conflict, and how each side is carrying it out. Paul does not look at the origins of this conflict, found in the Garden of Eden and Adam’s sin. In these verses Paul opens a window on the present state of this conflict, like a Frontline documentary filmmaker might present a picture of famine, corruption or injustice in the world. Paul is presenting the stark reality of a world in rebellion and at conflict with God. It is a
reality that each and every person has experienced in his or her lifetime.

What is the injustice that Paul wants to expose through this passage? Look again at verse 18, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.” When we read the book of Jonah, we find that the prophet Jonah was angry, because of his sense that God was being unfair in forgiving the Ninevites when they repented, while God’s own people the Jews had faced God’s wrath and discipline time and again. Many people find themselves angry with God, because of their perception that God is unfair, that his wrath is too harsh, or that his grace is too liberal. One young man was from the nation of Zambia in East Africa. His family was well off, and he enjoyed many privileges in his country and attended the best schools. One day, however, he found that his father, like many others in his nation, had been infected with AIDS. Soon, his father died, leaving him and his brother and sister as orphans. Then his mother became sick and incapacitated, also with AIDS. By God’s grace, he was able to leave Zambia and come to the US to study at Western Illinois University. While still in Zambia, he had heard many sermons proclaiming that God was punishing Zambia for her sins, especially the sins of sexual immorality. But when he came to the US, he found that American college students indulge in all kinds of immorality, without any pang of guilt or conscience. What is more, they had no worries about AIDS. Then he became angry with God over God’s perceived unfairness. Why should his people suffer so much, when Americans were sinning as much or more than his own people? Even Jesus’ disciples became disturbed when they saw a man blind from birth, and wondered if God knew what he was doing!

But Paul is not decrying the revelation of God’s wrath against mankind. On the contrary, what Paul wants us to see is the injustice of man’s rebellion against God and suppression of the truth of God. The grossest injustice in the history of the world is when the one who is formed says to the one who made him, “What have you done?” Isaiah 45:9 says, “Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to
the potter, ‘What are you making?’ Does your work say, ‘He has no hands’?” God is the Maker. God is the Creator of heaven and earth. God brought all mankind into being, and provided for mankind every kind of food and drink, so that man might live in thankfulness and peace. But mankind rejected God who made us, and chose to worship created things instead. It was not out of ignorance. It was a deliberate choice on the part of mankind. Verse 20 says, “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” Mankind chose to reject the truth, and follow evil. Verse 21 reads, “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”

In verse 21, Paul presents the root of the conflict that exists between God and man. God is our Creator, Provider, Counselor, Lord and Friend. God, though he is invisible, has made his love, power and grace known to us through his creation so that even a little child can know him and give thanks and praise from his or her heart. But man did not acknowledge that God is God, and did not give thanks to God for what he had. Instead, he looked around for other ‘gods’, ‘gods’ of his own creation, who would tell him what he wanted to hear, and permit him to do what he wanted to do. Verse 25 says, “They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things, rather than the Creator – who is forever to be praised.” The Creator God, our Maker, has been spurned by mankind. In our wickedness, we even took the Son of God and killed him in order to suppress God’s truth. Such a crime is worse than any betrayal ever committed in all the love stories recorded since the world began.

Betrayal like this deserves a wrathful response. Paul says that God’s wrath is being revealed against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. But what does God do in his wrath to sinful men? In verses 24, 26 and 28, Paul says the same thing: God gave them over to what they wanted. “Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.” “Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts.” “Furthermore, since they did
not consider it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave
them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.” God
in his wrath removes his guiding presence from our lives, allowing us
to pursue our sinful desires. He allows us to follow a lie; he lets us
receive the due penalty for our perversion; he permits our minds to be
fully depraved, our thinking to become futile, and our hearts darkened.
God in his wrath permits sin to run its course in our lives, until we
receive the due penalty for our sin. Have you experienced God’s wrath
in your life? At the moment Christ Jesus was nailed and hung from the
cross, God exposed his precious one and only Son to all his wrath and
judgment due men’s sins. Jesus, who bore all the beatings and trials
silently, cried out in agony at this time. He said, “My God, my God. Why
have you forsaken me?” Jesus’ loneliness and helplessness at the
moment God forsook him was more than he could humanly bear. It is
the picture of the loneliness and despair of all mankind living under
the wrath of God.

What are the consequences of God's wrath? In a word, it is
“degradation.” There is a progression in God’s wrath as described by
Paul in this chapter. God’s wrath first affects our hearts, then our
bodies, and finally our minds. Man’s heart is the fountain of love. Man’s
body is the fountain of his labor in the world. Man’s mind is the
fountain of his creativity and imagination. When these are given over
to perversion and depravity, they become fountains of sick and
disgusting things. In verses 24-27, Paul addresses the problem of
sexual impurity. The problem is not homosexuality. The problem is
making another human being the object of our desire and our worship.
It is idolatry that degrades our hearts and minds. Marriage does not
solve the problem of sexual impurity. The husband and wife must
worship and serve their Creator God, first. Then, they can love one
another purely.

Spiritual degradation is a progressive disease. Look at verses 28-32.
“Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the
knowledge of God, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what
ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of
wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder,
strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters,
insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.” When man rejected God in his pride and arrogance, he became the object of God’s wrath. As the object of God's wrath, he has become a fountain of evil-doing. Jesus said in Luke 17:1b-3a, “Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe that person through whom they come. It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves.” Jesus pronounced the death sentence on those who promote evil. God declares that the whole world is guilty of doing so. Therefore, not only are men under God's wrath – they are under God’s judgment.

II. God’s righteous Judgment (2:1-3:20)

First, God’s righteous standard. God's pronouncement of wrath and judgment is for all men. And all men know it. But men do not like the absolute truth of God. So they look for a way out, so that God's absolute judgment falls on someone else, not them. Paul, however, said, "men are without excuse." It is because God's standard of righteousness is not based on legal definitions and vague principles. God's judgment is based on the truth. God’s judgment comes on men because of what men do. Look at verse 2:6. "God will give to each person according to what he has done." God's righteous judgment has an absolute and inescapable standard. It is the heavenly standard that Jesus proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount. Paul summarizes this standard in verses 7-10. "To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for everyone who does evil; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good; first for the Jew, then for the Gentile." The judgment of God is objective, based on the truth that God sees and hears through what men do. According to 2:16, “This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets
through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.” At the judgment, our lives and our actions are considered by God in total, and compared against his righteous standard, which is Jesus Christ our Lord. There is eternal life for those who meet this standard. There will be trouble and distress, wrath and anger for those who don’t.

When we consider God’s standard of righteousness objectively, we know that it is the truth, and it is the only viable standard for righteousness. We should be judged according to what we have done. We should persistently do good and live to seek God's praise. When Cain prepared a half-hearted offering to God, God judged him as well as his offering, because what he did revealed what was in his heart. When God judged the world but spared Noah, he did so based on what the world failed to do, and what Noah did by building the ark, for it revealed his faith in God’s word and his heart to please God. The shepherd life of our Lord Jesus Christ is the true standard of righteous action for all men. When the Lord Jesus was preparing for his arrest and trial on the night of the Last Supper, John’s gospel records that it was at this time that Jesus decided to show his disciples the full extent of his love by washing their feet wearing only a towel wrapped around his waist. When Jesus was thirsty on the cross, after losing most of his blood and hanging naked in the hot sun, Jesus did not say he was thirsty until it was time to fulfill Scripture. Jesus lived and died to obey God’s will. Jesus' standard of obedience is beautiful, it is heart-moving, it is the truth. But when we measure ourselves against his standard, we fall short. When we try to do persistently what is good and right, we stumble and fall. Instead, we persistently follow our self-seeking desires.

This past Sunday, we studied “The Righteous Will Live By Faith.” I had already studied this passage in Toledo over the summer. So, I took my time in preparing the message, including reading the internet news about the Cubs’ playoff series. But as I began working on the message, I realized that I had not given myself enough time to properly reorganize the message so that it had one clear point. I barely finished revising in time then jumped on my bike to go home. In my hurry, I tried to cut some corners. But the bike pedal caught a curb, the bike stopped, pushing me back, and then the back wheel lifted up so that
the bike seat gave me a swift kick in the pants. Ouch. I raced home
and made it just in time. But my procrastination meant that I didn't
have time to call one person who needed my help to come to the
service. The fact that I didn’t get the message done on time or help
one person come to worship God seems like a small thing. But it’s not.
It reveals my self-seeking desire to live for my own glory and praise,
rather than for God and for his kingdom. Objectively speaking, I am no
better than Cain, who brought a half-hearted offering to God with many
good excuses. Objectively speaking, all mankind is without excuse,
falls short of God’s standard and can not escape God’s judgment.

In contrast to the unchanging, righteous and holy standard of God’s
judgment, there is the excuse-making and evasive behavior of men.
Look at 2:1. “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment
on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are
condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same
things.” Here, Paul’s choice of words, “to pass judgment”, is very
appropriate. There was a Far Side cartoon with two bears in a rifle-
sight. The bear in the middle was pointing energetically at the bear off
“God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers,
adulterers—or even like this tax collector.” It is the prayer of a bear in
the cross hairs of God’s judgment. Their problem is that what they
accuse the other of doing, they do, and even worse. Luke 18:13 goes
on to say, “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not
even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, “God, have mercy
on me, a sinner.” I tell you,” Jesus said, “that this man rather than the
other, went home justified before God.” The Pharisee could not receive
God’s grace of forgiveness, because he showed contempt for God’s
mercy by his merciless condemnation of others, without repenting for
his own greed, theft and immorality.

Other men hope to justify themselves by teaching others, rather than
condemning them. Look at verses 2:19-24. “If you are convinced that
you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, an
instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the
law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—you, then, who teach
others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do
you steal? You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? As it is written: “God’s name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.” As it was for the Jews, it is a great privilege for us to be able to teach the Bible to others, to pray for them, and to have God’s vision for our country and for the world. But these things have value for our salvation only if we do the things we teach. Otherwise, those who hear might believe and be saved, while we ourselves will be lost. In short, there is no way to escape God’s righteous standard that we must persistently do what is right, following our Lord Jesus Christ’s example. Look at verse 2:28-29. “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man’s praise is not from men, but from God.”

Second, human accountability (3:1-20). God’s standard of judgment is good and right. God’s word of life is beautiful and true. But there is a question. What good are they, if no one can live up to God’s standard, or obey his word? How can we be held accountable for what we are and what we do, if we are incapable of being anything else? And if our unrighteousness and failures only reveal God’s righteousness and truth all the more, shouldn’t we rather be praised for that, instead of being condemned? Doesn’t our persistent unbelief and unfaithfulness make God’s standard irrelevant? We are in a class of students that will all fail. Is that fair? Shouldn’t the teacher change the grading scale? Paul acknowledges the complaint, but he does not give it credence. Look at 3:5,6 and 8. “But if our unrighteousness brings out God’s righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing his wrath on us? (I am using a human argument.) Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the world? ...some claim that we say, “Let us do evil that good may result.” Their condemnation is deserved.” Man’s absolute unfaithfulness and sinfulness does not nullify God’s standard of righteousness. His standard still stands, though no one can meet it. And for that, we must praise the righteous and Almighty God, for he is faithful and true, although all men are not.
God who is faithful to the end upholds his righteous standard and with it, he holds all men accountable for what they do. This is the truth. Look at verse 3:9 and 10. “What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: There is no one righteous, not even one.” In short, God passes the test by maintaining his righteous standard, but man does not. Man, in his foolishness, thinks that he can escape the righteous standard of God by rejecting the truth in order to live by his own standard. It is a vain hope. The Jews, of all people, had some hope that through the law they could be saved. But what the law says to them, it says to all men through them. “All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” (3:12). Look at verse 20. “Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.” In short, the law exposes the true nature of the conflict between God and man. But it does not solve it.

Paul, in his “documentary” of the conflict between God and men, exposes the injustice and foolishness of men who reject God’s standard of truth for the sake of satisfying our sinful desires. God will not compromise his standard, no matter how sinful we may be. The path of rebellion and disobedience is a dead end. But what can be our hope, in the face of God’s certain judgment? In fact, this is our only hope – to face up to God’s judgment. We must face up to God for what we have done, and did not do. That is the gift of the law. Only when we are conscious of sin can true conversion take place. In fact, the moment when we face up to God’s righteous standard is a moment of tearful, cleansing joy. It is the moment when we confess: “Yes, I am a sinner, but you, my God, you are truly righteous and holy. I am at your mercy.” It is the beginning of new life for those who know the grace of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We must stop making excuses before God. May God have mercy on us and give us a spirit of repentance, until we might do through Christ Jesus what is good and right by faith.