



## Man's Guilt (Romans 1:18-32)

Gerald Bray, Lecturer at Oak Hill College,  
London

To understand the meaning of the Gospel, and why it is such good news for mankind, we must first understand why it is necessary. Unless we can grasp what God is like, how he has created and ordered the world, and how man has turned away from him, we will never really appreciate what God has done for us. In a sense it is easy to realise what is wrong with the human race, since we are all members of it and the evidence is in and around us every day. But unfortunately, knowing the problem and facing up to it are by no means the same thing! It is especially difficult when the problem is one which affects us deeply ourselves. We can often see what is wrong in others, but are blind to our own faults, and are not especially happy when others point them out to us. When God is the one telling us what is wrong we are often even more angry than we would be with another human being, and so submitting to his will, instead of being an easy, logical thing to do, becomes impossible – unless God himself gets to work inside us and breaks down the barriers that prevent us from following him.

So it is that the first mention Paul makes of God's revelation is to tell us that divine wrath will descend from heaven to punish the wickedness of men! This is a very clear warning to us, but it is a very unpleasant one as well, and for centuries people have struggled to water down what Paul is saying. It would be hard to deny that mankind has behaved in this way, so most of the objections concentrate on the character of God as it is portrayed in this passage. How can a God of love get angry and threaten to punish the creatures he has made in his own image? Indeed, is it even worthy to speak of God in such terms at all, when he is so much greater than our petty problems here on earth? Surely the emphasis of the Gospel should be on forgiveness and restoration, not on anger and punishment?

It is easy to see why objections of this kind have often been made, and why they are so attractive to many people who simply cannot face up to the seriousness of what they themselves have done. All of us are willing to admit that we are not perfect, at least in theory, but we learn to live with this by accepting the fact that 'to err is human'. So, making mistakes is not all that bad, unless we get ourselves or others into trouble for it! Some people even think that a little sin makes life more interesting, and regard totally clean-living people as dull and boring! The Gospel will never attract anybody by sending them to sleep, so bit by bit we open ourselves to the possibility that God, too, likes having a little fun on the side from time to time! We live in an affluent age and in a permissive society, and we cannot escape from these pressures, even inside the church. Yet the Bible offers not the slightest comfort for this modern, and basically lazy, way of thinking, and the sooner we get to grips with this fact the better.

Paul explains the basic human problem of sin in the same way as he has already explained his own status and calling as a

Christian. That is to say that a man without God is condemned, first, because of what he is and second, because of what he *does*. As always in Paul's thought, being precedes doing, and is basically more important. The word used here to describe man's state is *impiety*, a strange sounding word which suggests that what is required is a slightly unreal kind of devotion to God.

Once again, our language lets us down by its tendency to be too precise, and in this case, unduly negative, about the meaning of this word. Impiety does not mean unwillingness to go to church on Sunday and sing hymns in the company of a few old ladies! Impiety describes something much broader and deeper than that! It is nothing less than total rebellion against God in every sphere of our lives. At the root of the word lies the concept of relationship, as in the somewhat old-fashioned term 'filial piety', and it is the brokenness of our relationship with God which is the fundamental problem we have to face. This brokenness leads inevitably to acts of injustice, or unrighteousness. In English we tend to think of injustice as a public category of wrongdoing and of unrighteousness as something more private and internal, but this distinction does not exist in the New Testament. Whether it is in thought, word or deed, everything we do is twisted and fundamentally wrong in the sight of God, because of this broken relationship with him.

What makes matters still worse is that sinful men know in their hearts that they have turned away from God. We all know that ignorance of the law is no excuse, even though the ignorance may be quite genuine. But in the things of God nobody is really ignorant. Paul says here that everyone knows, deep down inside, that he or she has turned away from the Creator. We may try to suppress this knowledge, or even devise elaborate philosophical systems to convince ourselves that God does not exist. But deep down inside we all know that this is a lie, that in moral terms we have sinned against God and are just not prepared to face up to that fact. God does not leave himself without a witness, and that witness condemns us as surely as any judge.

Of course, if we start asking what that witness is and how we come to know it, we soon discover that God's way of making his presence felt is not our way! The things of God are invisible, and cannot be neatly pinned down and analysed. The natural sciences are of no real help to us here, and our understanding of human nature is very poor indeed if we think we can reduce man to the chemical sum of his parts! All that is most significant in human life is invisible, and comes far closer to the reality of God than we think. Love, for example, cannot be seen, but it is certainly very real. The mind, thought and ideas are likewise very powerful agents of change in our lives, yet none of them can be reduced to purely scientific categories. The creative imagination and intuitive genius are likewise inexplicable in material terms, but only a fool would attempt to deny their importance.

Materialism, the crude creed of so many today, is an idol with feet of clay, and no head at all. It simply cannot survive careful examination of its tenets and is adopted more in ignorance or conscious rebellion against God than out of a genuine conviction that it is true.

In opposition to this tendency God bears witness to himself in our minds, by giving us a picture of his power and of his divinity. Here it might seem that for once Paul has reversed his usual be-do pattern, but this reversal is only apparent, not real. For the power of which he speaks here is a power which is latent in God, what we would call his potential. It is true, of course, as theologians never tire of explaining, that there is no unrealised potential in God, but we do not need to go into such philosophical complexities here in order to understand what Paul is saying to us. What he means is that God's power is what he is inside himself – it is a definition of who he is. His divinity, on the other hand, is seen in what he does. This is obvious if we compare the way we use the word 'humanity'. I am a man, and what I do demonstrates my humanity, *i.e.* what it means to be human. In the same way, God is God, and what he does manifests his divinity, *i.e.* what it means to be God. So even here, who God is comes before what God does, and the overall pattern of Paul's thought remains unchanged.

The reason why God reveals himself in this way is, of course, so that none of us should be left without an excuse. We are people who know God in our hearts, but who do not act in accordance with that knowledge. This is deeply illogical, but the sin of the human heart is something which goes much deeper than logic. This is why mere knowledge of the truth is quite incapable of saving anybody. As sinners we neither worship God for who he is nor thank him for what he does (note that be-do pattern again!). Instead, we deceive ourselves by false arguments and our hearts, unable to understand or to be sensitive to the things of God, are darkened by our own foolishness. Here Paul picks up a number of themes which recur in the Old Testament, but which are often unfamiliar to us today. First, there is the idea that sin leads to confusion. 'Let me never be confounded' was the prayer of the saints of old, because they recognised that sin inevitably led to intellectual, as well as to spiritual disorder. We often fail to see this because we elevate Reason into an autonomous being, whereas in fact, it is only a function of the mind. It is linked in turn, *via* the heart, to the will and to the emotional centre of our being. The Old Testament concept of the 'heart' includes the mental process in a way which sounds strange to us – another example of how our language has narrowed a biblical concept and impoverished it by excessive analysis. Finally, the ignorance of sin is pictured as darkness, the very opposite of the God who is pure light (John 1:5).

There then follows a clear and somewhat sinful analysis of how sin operates in us when we are cut off from the light of God. First of all, we imagine that we are wise. That is to say, we assume that we are capable, within the limits of our own knowledge and training, of making decisions affecting our lives without recourse to any outside authority. True wisdom, of course, can only be had in God and from God, so the result of man's refusal to turn to him is predictable. Instead of demonstrating the power of wisdom, we show that in reality we are fools, and this perverts our whole way of thinking.

The first sign of this can be seen in the things we worship. Because of the relatively successful penetration of Christianity in Western countries, we are no longer accustomed to the kind of idolatry which was so common in the ancient world. We do not regard centaurs or the sphinx as real beings, nor would we offer sacrifices to the statues of glorified humans. But if the cruder manifestations of idol worship are no longer with us, the phenomenon itself is still alive and well in our midst. It is only that today we have become more sophisticated and more practical. We worship money, power and success. We cultivate youthful beauty, fast cars and popular music – and make demigods of those who provide us with such baubles. We may even think that being a beauty queen or a film star entitles us to pontificate on weighty matters of politics or economics, or even to be elected to public office! The bread and circuses which the Roman emperors used to pacify an idle populace have nothing on the methods used in the electronic village!

Those who rebel against God have only one way to turn – to the created order, and it is there that they manifest most clearly the results of their revolt against heaven. Paul tells us quite frankly that God accepts this situation, because he respects the free choice that mankind has made. But God makes sure that we experience the full consequence of that choice by turning us over to impurity. Our minds are darkened, and we demonstrate this by the dishonour to which we subject our bodies. Sin does not begin in the body, but its consequences are soon made apparent there. Those who abuse the gifts of God's creation for pleasure, or as a substitute for a peaceful relationship with God, will inevitably pay the price, whether it is in cancerous lungs, a rotten liver, or a diseased nervous system, unable to cope with the effect of drugs. We all know this, but to those who are hooked on these things the truth appears as a lie – statistics invented by the government or the medical profession – something which will never happen to me!

Haunted by this depressing picture, Paul pauses for a moment to offer praise to our Creator, who remains blessed for all eternity, before returning to his unhappy theme. Once again he reminds us that God turns us over to the passions – the word also means sufferings, remember – of the dishonour which we bring on ourselves. In terms of human relationships, the disorder of sin quickly manifests itself in widespread homosexuality. It is very curious to note that although heterosexual sin is condemned elsewhere in Scripture, Paul does not refer to it here. Probably this is because he thinks of it as something different in kind from homosexuality. Today we are being asked to accept the validity of an alternative lifestyle – some people are attracted to the opposite sex, but others are not. In reality of course, most people like other people of either sex; the question is how we are expected to relate to them. The Bible establishes lifelong monogamy between the sexes as the norm for physical relationships between human beings. Deviations from this norm, like polygamy, divorce or co-habitation may be tolerated to varying degrees, but the principle of sexual union between male and female is never lost sight of.

On the other hand, the Bible also upholds a social order in which men and women play equal but distinct roles. Outside the marriage relationship, it is normally expected that each sex will club together with its own kind, and we find this role conscious-

ness set out quite clearly in Scripture. Paul has no hesitation in addressing men, women, children and even widows as distinct groups, and he is quite prepared to assign different roles and tasks to each. The trouble starts when these established roles are overturned in the name of freedom and autonomy.

Sexual introversion is a natural consequence of setting man up in the place of God, but Paul does not forget that every other kind of sin is also present in the mind which has turned away from knowledge of the divine and which God has given over to its own desires. The list makes painful reading, but we need to remember that God has given it to us as a reminder and a warning of what awaits us if we ignore his Word. In a day and age when people with centuries of Christian teaching are abandoning it in the pursuit of wealth and pleasure, God's reckoning is nearer than ever before. Whether we like it or not therefore, we have got to think very carefully about these verses and ask ourselves to what extent our own attitudes and behaviour have been affected by, or might even contribute to, the spread of these social ills.

Not surprisingly we find that fornication comes at the top of the list. When social relationships cease to be governed by the law of God they quickly settle into a pattern in which the desires of the flesh reign supreme. This is nothing new, and the history of the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century serves as a reminder of what can happen when a nation abandons the preaching of the Gospel, treats religion as old-fashioned, and seeks to enjoy itself by whatever means it can. The biggest difference between that age and ours is that modern prosperity and technology have made promiscuity much less costly and more easily available for the masses than ever before. Social historians will tell us, of course, that prostitution was even more prevalent in supposedly righteous Victorian London than it is now, and that is almost certainly true. The main difference is that then it was openly condemned and recognised as a social evil, whereas modern liberalism, by tolerating a loose sexual ethic in everyday life, has probably reduced the market for more traditional types of fornication. It is the loss of a sense of wrongdoing which is so dangerous today, and which threatens the whole of our social fabric.

The next category, wickedness or evil, is fairly open-ended, but in this context it probably refers mainly to the behaviour which we adopt in our dealings with others. In this respect it ties in nicely with what follows. The basic human emotion in social intercourse is greed, and so it is appropriate to find that listed first here. Greed is a form of selfishness which corrupts our dealings with others, and indeed our whole attitude to life. It used to be thought that it was a particular disease of the middle classes, which in the nineteenth century ruthlessly exploited the working population in order to be able to live in luxury. That was always a caricature, of course, but the twentieth century has demonstrated that greed can penetrate to every level of society, especially once it becomes possible to satisfy the desire. Unfortunately, like all such desires, greed increases with every attempt to satisfy it. The prospect of easy money can corrupt even the most high-minded idealism, and when this temptation is offered to a wide spectrum of society, the likelihood that a social conscience will emerge declines accordingly. Why give to the

poor when everybody knows that poverty is only the result of laziness?

The Bible tells us that the love of money is the root of all evil, and now we see just what that involves. Malice and envy are the natural consequences of frustrated greed. We see the prosperity of others, and if it is greater than ours we start explaining it by their sharp practices and misdemeanours. We examine their behaviour in order to find fault with it, in the hope that their house of cards will come tumbling down to make way for us. To get our way we may resort to anything, even murder – and if we do not actually kill people physically, we often do everything in our power to obtain the same practical result by other means. Jesus told his disciples that hatred is already an attitude of murder, punishable in the same way. Once that level of respect for the person of another is destroyed, the way is open for every kind of sin, and that is what we now find Paul listing for us. We start arguing with people, we deceive them, we do things deliberately in order to harm them, we gossip about them and we slander them in whatever way seems most likely to advance our own aims.

This behaviour, Paul then reminds us, has a cause which is rooted in our basic attitude towards God. It is because we hate him that we are driven to hate others. It is because we are ungrateful to him for what he has given us that we are so ready to criticise and complain. Pride and boasting come naturally to us when we are in this condition, and the resources of our creative imagination are fully employed in thinking up one wicked scheme after another. Such attitudes lead inevitably to behaviour which destroys even the most basic and sacred relationships, and it is this that Paul moves on to as he concludes his sorry list.

People who hate God's law will be disobedient to their parents. Paul is not talking here about normal teenage rebellion, nor does he give parents a blank cheque to dominate their children in whatever way they like. Disobedience here is something much more basic than this. It is nothing less than ignoring the wisdom passed on to us as part of a normal, moral upbringing. Our parents may have taught us the moral law, and even set an example for us, but we have preferred to ignore all that and go our own way. By choosing to ignore their teaching, we demonstrate that we are without understanding, and that we are prepared to break whatever ties might bind us to other human beings. The result is that all our relationships are tainted with the same hardness, the same lack of love, the same inability to make allowances or to forgive.

The worst of all is that we know all this in our hearts, but it makes no difference to us. Because we are cut off from God, we are not shocked by this kind of behaviour. On the contrary, we derive a perverse kind of satisfaction from it and even think highly of people who show themselves to be experts at it. Ever wonder why soap operas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* are so popular? Here you have the answer – the sinful heart rejoices at the sight of successful sin. It is the ultimate degradation, and the ultimate condemnation, of the man who has turned away from the law and the love of God.