



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of Dan Duncan

Romans 1:18-23

Romans

"Heart of Darkness"

TRANSCRIPT

[Message] Our text this morning is Romans chapter 1:18-23. Paul writes, "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because that which is known about God is evidence within them; for God made it evidence to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man or of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures."

May the Lord bless this reading of His word. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do ask You to bless the reading of scripture to our hearts and our minds, and pray that You'd bless our time of study in it together. We consider it a great privilege to be here this morning, to be gathered with the saints, with believers in Jesus Christ, and to be able to read the text together and consider its meaning in some depth.

And so as we do that, we pray that You would instruct us. You've blessed us abundantly, Father, as we reflect upon that this morning, as we reflect upon the fact that while men give no thanks to

You, there's great ingratitude in the world. We are, by implication, to be thankful, and we have much to be thankful for.

You have blessed us abundantly, beyond all that we have asked or even thought. You've blessed us spiritually. You've blessed us with new life in Jesus Christ. Every believer in Jesus Christ has that life from You and has that faith, which laid hold of the gospel, which laid hold of You. That faith is a gift from you. Everything that we have comes from You, Father. We are abundantly blessed beyond our imaginations, and we praise You and thank You for that, and pray that our time together this morning would be instructive, it would be a benefit to us, that we would be edified, built up in the faith, that we would, through out time together, understand more clearly who You are, understand more clearly who we are, understand our nature, what we are by nature and what we have become by virtue of Your sovereign grace. We have much to be thankful for.

You've blessed us abundantly spiritually, and I pray, Father, that You'd build us up spiritually. May the Spirit of God move amongst us, open our hearts to receive Your truth. Bless the words that are spoken. Bless the minds that receive it. Give us discernment, and through this time together, may we, as I said, become more like Christ, conform to His image.

We pray for ourselves spiritually, but we also pray for our physical needs. We are made physical creatures, Father. We depend upon the elements in which we live and move. We are dependent upon all that You have provided in this world. We are dependent creatures and we pray that You would make provision for our physical needs and make us grateful for the provision You make, because You make it abundantly.

Sometimes that does not seem to be the case, because sometimes rather than enjoy and experience abundance, we experience privation. We go without the things of this world; we're deprived of them for a time, we're deprived of material things, we're deprived of health. But all of that for a purpose, Father, and it's to turn our eyes, our thoughts

toward You, and we pray for those who are suffering needs of those kinds.

We pray for the sick and we pray for those who are recovering from surgeries. We pray that You'd give them healing and comfort and encouragement.

Bless those who are discouraged by the concerns of life, and they do weigh us down at times, Father, and we pray that You would build them up, encourage them through their affliction. Cause them to draw close to the throne of grace, where they may find help in time of need. Bless all of us to that end.

So we pray for ourselves this morning, Father, that You'd build us up, and we pray that You would bless us this evening when we return to this place and we take the Lord's supper and we remember His death for us. We remember His first coming, reflect upon that redemption that was made, and accomplished at the cross, and the life that we have because of Him, a life we have because of His death.

And remember, Lord, that He is coming again. His first coming was a first coming. There's a second coming. There's a return to this earth and He is coming with His reward. May we learn to live in light of that and learn to live for that. And we learn to live lives of service to You, and not like the world, not like the world of fallen men that does not give You honor and does not give You thanks.

May we be a people that do that. And we thank You for all that You've done for us. We will spend all eternity reflecting upon it and praising You for it. May we do some to measure this morning, we pray. Prepare our hearts to do that, to study and to worship through our final hymn. We pray that You would use it in preparation for what we will do in the moments to come as we open the text again and study it. We pray these things in Christ name. Amen.

[Message] As we come to our text this morning, we have finished Paul's introduction to the book of Romans, and now with verse 18 of chapter 1, we enter a new section, which is the first major division of the book.

Its development and theme remind me of a small novel by Joseph Conrad entitled *Heart of Darkness*. I've taken that as the title of our lesson this morning. Briefly, it's the story of a man's journey up the Congo River in search of a rogue ivory trader named Kurtz. As the journey progresses, civilization recedes and life along the river becomes increasingly primitive and savage, until finally the journey ends at a place of chaos and madness.

Which is very much what Paul gives us in the rest of Romans 1 with his blunt and thorough description of man's spiritual condition. He presents it as a progressive decline into corruption. We see that in verse 24 with the statement, "God gave them over." Three times Paul states that, and each time it indicates a further descent into spiritual darkness and depravity.

For 1:18 to 3:20, this is Paul's theme: The universal sin and guilt of mankind, which has put the whole race under God's judgment. It's a passage that stands in stark contrast with the previous one, where in verse 17 Paul states the theme of the book, which is the righteousness of God. It's not the righteousness that we produce and by which we gain God's acceptance and approval - just the opposite. This is the gift of God's righteousness, which is received by faith alone.

But with the next verse, with verse 18, we move from the righteousness of God is revealed to the wrath of God is revealed. And it's as though it's a bright, beautiful day when a dark storm cloud suddenly passes before the sun, with lightning flashes and peals of thunder, and the subject is no longer grace, but judgment. God's wrath due to man's sin.

But storms can serve a good purpose. And while this isn't a pleasant topic, it is an important one, because it shows why the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel is necessary. Man is lost. His religion is futile and corrupt. He can't save himself. He needs a savior. He needs God's grace.

Paul demonstrates that first with the Gentiles, here in chapter 1, and then in chapter 2 with the Jews, and then finally with a summation of the problem in 3:10, "There is none righteous, not even one." Survey humanity, look at the Gentile, look at the Jew, look at them in their religions and they produce nothing that merits God's favor. There is none righteous, not even one. So if we are to be saved, we need the righteousness that only God can give, the righteousness revealed in the gospel, because the wrath of God is revealed against all unrighteousness.

That, as I said, is our subject. Not a pleasant one. Preachers don't enjoy talking about God's wrath any more than physicians enjoy giving their patients bad news. But doctors do that because it's necessary. A diagnosis, a correct diagnosis, in medicine in the first step toward recovery, and so too a correct diagnosis of man's condition and exposure of man's sin and guilt is the first step toward spiritual recovery. And that's Paul's aim.

It's man's salvation. That's Paul's great concern. That's what the gospel that he preached is all about. It is, as he said, the power of God for salvation. And now he shows that it is the need of every person, universally. The guilt of mankind is universal. Paul begins his formal exposition of the gospel with an indictment on the whole human race. He begins, "Wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness of men."

Now, we need to have a clear understanding of what Paul means by that expression, "the wrath of God," because it is an idea that has been misunderstood and often misconstrued as being like human anger. People lose their temper. They fly into a rage, they strike at those who have offended them. Wrath is often thought of as a vindictive act of violence. It often is. It's an outworking of pride or jealousy or envy. None of those characteristics is virtuous, commendable, and so people, with that thought in mind, dismiss the idea of God's wrath as something that's unworthy of God. And of course that idea of wrath is completely unworthy of God. But God's

wrath is not like man's anger. It is righteous and it is worthy of His character.

John Murray, in his commentary on the book of Romans gave a good definition of God's wrath. It is, he writes, "the holy revulsion of God's being against that which is a contradiction of His holiness." Let me read that again. "God's wrath is the holy revulsion of God's being," His person, His character, "against that which is the contradiction of His holiness."

In other words, because God is holy, He is against everything that is unholy. Or as John Stock put it, "His wrath is His holy hostility to evil." And He must be hostile toward evil. Would we respect and would we worship Him if He were indifferent toward evil, if He were neutral toward cruelty, toward suffering, toward sorrow? We're not. We see such things and we are repulsed and angered by the cruelty and the injustice that we see in the world. How much more a God who is holy and perfect. He must be opposed to that.

Wrath is a necessary aspect of God's holy character. He must hate evil, He must oppose it, and He does. Bible speaks of that quite plainly, both Testaments - both the Old and the New Testament are very clear on God's wrath. It speaks of His fierce anger and His burning anger and His holy anger. All those are Biblical terms. There's no denying that the Bible teaches the wrath of God.

In the New Testament, there are two Greek words that are especially used of wrath: thumos and orge. Thumos is a more passionate anger, rising and falling quickly. It's like rage. Sometimes that's attributed to God at certain times, certain characteristics. You see that, for example, in the book of Revelation.

Orge is a more settled emotion and that's the word that's used here in our passage. It's not a sudden outbreak of anger, but a strong, settled opposition to all that is evil. And it is evil, Paul says, that is the object of God's wrath, His orge, all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

Now, we know that God will pour out His wrath on the wicked in a future day. The Bible speaks of the Judgment Day. It speaks of the day of the Lord and the day of wrath. Revelation 19, John gives us that apocalyptic vision of Christ returning on a white horse and treading the winepress of the fierce wrath of God.

That day is coming. Great day of judgment is coming on the earth, and the Lord has promised that when that day comes, He will end evil altogether. The day is coming when He will sweep evil from the earth, and when the final rebellion takes place and the final rebellion is put down, He will wipe away every tear from our eye and there will no longer be any death.

Well, that day is coming. That's a future day and that's clearly taught in the word of God, but this is not that. Paul is not describing the future day of reckoning, but a present manifestation of wrath. Notice what he says - "is revealed" - present tense.

It's not until verse 24 and following that Paul explains how wrath is being revealed, when he gives the three-fold statement, "God gave them over." That's the wrath of God which is seen in God abandoning men to immorality, which results in progressive descent into sexual perversion and all kinds of degrading vices.

That is judgment, and not simply conduct that merits judgment. We read through the rest of Romans chapter 1 and we read all of the terrible vices that are listed: envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, all of these kinds of things and others. And as we read that, we say, well, that certainly is the kind of conduct that merits the wrath of God and it certainly does, but that's not what Paul is saying here. He's not describing this as conduct that merits judgment, but conduct that is judgment.

Sin and the misery it produces is the present wrath revealed. Verse 24, "God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to do impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them." This wrath against man is due to man's sin against God. That's indicated

here where Paul states that God's wrath is revealed against all ungodliness and all unrighteousness.

One of the older commentators, J.B. Lightfoot, distinguished between these two words by defining ungodliness as being against God, and unrighteousness as being against man. The one follows the other, because man is God; he is against man. Because he is ungodly, he is unrighteousness. But it all begins with sin against God.

So apostasy is the reason for immorality. Apostasy is the reason for violence and all kinds of sin and crime. And apostasy is defection from the truth. Apostasy is the deliberate abandonment of the faith, a willful turning from the light to the darkness. And that is what Paul describes here. They suppress the truth and unrighteousness.

Now that means they hold it back. That's the idea in this word "suppress." They restrain the truth. The same word, for example, is used in 2 Thessalonians 2:6, 7 of the Holy Spirit restraining the Man of Sin, holding him back. There is a restraining power going on throughout history in which God is holding back an outbreak of evil which will occur in the last days when the Man of Sin will arise; the Anti Christ will take his stand on the field of history, but until that, God is restraining evil. He is holding it back.

And it's the same word that is used here. That's the idea that Paul is conveying here, only in an opposite sense of men sinning against God by holding back the truth, rather than God holding back evil. It is willful. It is not a holding back. It is not a suppression of ignorance. Not that men respond in this way, respond to God in the way that Paul describes, because they're ignorant of God. They are not all. They know the truth. They're actively rejecting what they know.

It's very similar, I think, to what we read in John 3:19. "This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil." They saw the light; they rejected the light. Why? Because their deeds were evil and the light exposes that, and they don't want their evil exposed. They don't want to be in submission to the light and so they reject it.

Now there, the Light is Christ. The light that Paul refers to here is more general. It is revelation in nature. But the idea is the same. The principle is the same. Men love darkness and hate light, and so they reject the truth willfully, knowingly.

That's what Paul explains in verses 19 and 20. The reason he can say men suppress the truth is because God made it known to them. They weren't ignorant of it. They couldn't be. God did not allow man to be uninformed. He is not allowing man to be uninformed. All men everywhere have seen the truth about God, the revelation of God.

So their rejection of it is deliberate. They hold it back. They hinder it. They reject it purposely, intentionally, which means that all men everywhere are without excuse. And that is what Paul demonstrates in verse 20, that all men are without excuse, because they have rejected the clear revelation that God has made of Himself. The revelation that Paul refers to here is what theologians have called natural, or general, revelation, which is God's revelation of Himself in nature.

In fact, Romans 1:19 and 20 is one of the principle New Testament passages on this subject of general revelation, a name which indicates the extent of it. It is general, because everyone everywhere has received it. Everyone in the world has this revelation and it's been that way from the very beginning of creation. God has actively revealed Himself in the natural order to all men and women, so that all know that there is a God.

But specifically, Paul writes in verse 20 that they know of "His eternal power and divine nature." That statement, "divine nature," means the perfections of deity, the properties of God, the attributes of God, and he's saying they're evidence in creation. He might demonstrate that by drawing an analogy between God and an artist. We know something about an artist from the work that he or she does.

And all of us have artists in our family, or if we have children, because we put their pictures up on the refrigerator door, maybe a finger painting, or something like that. But we look at that and we

learn something about our child, learn something about their view of the world. Maybe if it's a picture of a sun with a smiling face, we know something about their disposition. Certainly know something about their skill, whether they have much or don't have any. We love them so we put it up there.

But then we compare that to a painting by, say, Rembrandt, and we see the difference and we learn in a painting by Rembrandt of his great skill. That's a revelation about that man and what he could do, and something about his understanding of the world, because of the subject matter that he painted and the way he painted it.

Learn something about him, just as we learn something about Picasso or Miro or some of the modern artists and what they thought and how they viewed life. The painting reveals something about the artist, and the greatest work of all is the creation itself, and it reveals something about the creator. We learn something about God by looking at the natural realm. We learn that He's personal. We learn that He is powerful, and His power proves that He's eternal. This is eternal power, Paul says, that is revealed. Since He made all things, it is only reasonable to conclude that He must have existed before all things. therefore, He is eternal.

These aspects of God are what Paul calls His invisible attributes. You can't see them. You can't see God in and of Himself. God is a spirit. God is invisible. We can't see Him. We can't look into the essence of deity, and He would have remained invisible, would have remained hidden to us, unknown to us, had He not chosen to reveal Himself, which He did, from the very beginning. Paul said since the creation of the world, God has always manifested Himself.

There has always been revelation of God to man. Man has never existed at a time when there was no revelation of God, from the very beginning. Since the creation of the world, He has made Himself known, at least in the created order so that even though He is invisible, His attributes are clearly seen and they're clearly seen,

meaning they're clearly understood, in the visible things that God made in the world around us.

As people look around at the creation, they can see the indisputable evidence that there is a God, a personal God, an eternal God, a powerful God. They know there is a creator, what people often refer to as a supreme being. That much is certain, from general revelation, from the revelation of God in nature. The Bible clearly teaches that.

The Old Testament equivalent to Romans 1:19 and 20 is Psalm 19. That's the great theme of how God has revealed Himself in the world around us. It begins "The heavens are telling of the glory of God/And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands/Day to day pours forth speech/And night to night reveals knowledge." Now the speech of the universe is inaudible. There are no words, as David says, but, he goes on, "Their line has gone out throughout all the earth/And their utterance to the end of the world."

In other words, the creation, the natural realm, is a continual wordless disclosure of God's existence and glory. And everyone in the world has received this revelation from the very beginning. So there's no excuse for unbelief. There's no excuse for atheism. And no safe haven in agnosticism, which is that elusive position some people take, which they don't deny the existence of God. That's too bold a stand. They just deny that God can be known. Might say something like, "Well, I would believe if I had some clear evidence. I'd love to believe in a God who's watching over me. I'd love to believe in an eternal destiny and heaven and all of that, but I need some evidence. I just don't know."

It's kind of an elusive position. But Paul doesn't give any comfort to those who hold either atheism or agnosticism, because he says all men can know. There's no excuse for either one. All men can know. In fact, as he points out in verse 21, all men do know. They know the truth. They may suppress it, and they do, but that knowledge is there. It is innate. So they are without excuse, because God's

existence has been made known. His attributes, as Paul says, are clearly seen. Heavens are declaring the glory of God. You cannot miss it.

More astronomers probe the vastness of space, the more vast and complex we learn that it is. When we turn our eye from the telescope to the microscope, we enter a world that seems just as endless and complex and orderly as the outward world. From the macrocosm to the microcosm, the cosmos is filled with mysteries and wonders that defy anything but a theistic explanation for why things are. It all points to an eternalized and powerful creator.

Well, man even has that testimony within his heart. We have a sense of morality. We all universally have a sense of right and wrong. Some places, some cultures have a greater sense of it than others, but everywhere one goes, there's a sense of right and wrong. And Paul indicates that in verse 32 of the first chapter, and then in chapter 2 he develops that a little more extensively in verses 14 and 25 through 26. It's universal. All men have a conscience, as we call it.

But where does that come from? Where do we have this sense of right and wrong? From the creator. The conscience is the remnant of the image of God in which all men and women were made. It's not what it was when it was perfectly made. It is the wreck and the ruin of that image, but that is a remnant of the image of God, and it is the eternal testimony to God's existence.

Testimony of nature bears witness to the conscience of man's heart that God is. And even if man can shut his eyes to the sun and the stars and to all of the glories of nature, he still has within him a conscience that bears witness. We cannot escape that testimony. We're made in the image of God and it bears witness to God's existence.

Now having this general revelation does not save. It's not designed to do that. That is why God gave a second kind of revelation, what is called special revelation, when He revealed Himself in Jesus Christ as the Savior of sinners. That revelation, special revelation, is

given in history and in the inspiration of scripture. It makes known God's grace in Christ.

General revelation makes known God's glory in creation. It does not reveal the way of salvation. We cannot learn of salvation by looking at the stars. Only the scriptures give us that. That's the gospel. That's special revelation.

But general revelation does reveal God and it is sufficient revelation to condemn those who reject it. It's not enough to save those who accept it, but it's enough to condemn those who reject it. And men do reject it. It's clear, it's seen throughout the universe, yet men do reject it. That is where guilt begins. The knowledge of God given in nature and clearly seen did not lead men to worship God. In fact, just the opposite. They worship nature itself. Verse 21, "For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks. They became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened."

That's the conduct for which they are without excuse, which is what Paul is showing, that all mankind is inexcusably guilty. Men and women have rejected God's light for darkness. Now, why is that? I ask the question, because as you consider man, man is insatiably curious. It has this innate desire to know and understand the world around him, and so we have scientists that send out probes into outer space, or look deep into the world in which we live to find out the origin of things, why things are here, how it all came to be. Men want to know this. So why is it that people don't want this knowledge of God, which is the clear revelation of God? And why things are what they are? Why do they reject it?

I think Paul suggests the answer in two responses that he attributes to man. Men did not honor God; men did not give thanks to God. Man didn't acknowledge his debt to God by thanking Him, because that would acknowledge His dependence upon God. When we give thanks to someone, we're acknowledging that they've given us something. We are, in effect, in their debt. We've received something

from them, and so to give God thanks is to indicate that we're His debtor. We indicate that we receive from Him. All that we have, we receive from Him.

Men don't do that, nor do they honor God, because that would be an acknowledgement of His sovereignty, recognizing His rightful place over us. And men hate that. Men hate the sovereignty of God. They want autonomy. They want their freedom, their independence, to be a self-directed person, to be a law unto themselves. That's what man wants, to be their own boss and do their own thing. That's what it comes down to.

And so they reject God. We find that all through scripture. From beginning to end, we find that occurrence, from Adam. No one had a clearer understanding of general revelation than he did. He was made perfect and placed in a flawless environment with great freedom. He only had one restriction, one rule, one tree that he couldn't have. But that one rule reminded Adam that he is a creature and that he is subject to the creator.

He is subject to God and he did not like that. He wanted to be like God. He wanted to be the sovereign. So rather than be thankful for all the trees, rather than look north, east, south, west, and say, "Look at all that you've given me; thank You, God," he looked to that one tree and he robbed it of its tree in rebellion against God.

We see that same spirit all through scripture. We go to Psalm 2 and we see the kings of the earth banding together to break God's cords from them. Go to the New Testament and we come to the parable in Luke 19, where the citizens say, "We will not have this man to rule over us." Both the psalm and the parable were fulfilled in the Jews' and the Gentiles' rejection of Christ as king. The spirit of rebellion has been with mankind from the very beginning.

But it has consequences. We were made to worship and serve God, not be free of Him. Man cannot be fulfilled, man cannot be happy in this world with this so-called freedom that he seeks. We were not made for that. We were made to serve God, to worship Him, so

everything is wrong, everything is out of joint, when we aren't subject to Him.

David wrote, in Psalm 36:9, a remarkable statement. Now, every verse of scripture is remarkable, every verse of scripture is inspired. Every verse is important, but some have greater importance, and we see that in this verse, because David writes, "With You is the fountain of life/In Your light we see light." We have life because we gain it from You, Lord. We have understanding only to the degree that we understand Your revelation, to the degree that we submit to Your revelation do we understand ourselves and the world around us.

So when people turn from God, they leave life and light. There's nothing but death and darkness there, and confusion for those who have abandoned the truth of God, which is how Paul describes men. "Their foolish heart was darkened." This is the origin of false religion in all its forms of degrading idolatry. Paul goes on to develop that. But the origin of it is here. The origin of all of that - of false religion, of evil conduct, all of it, has its origin in unbelief. That begins the downward slide.

John Murray wrote, "The mind of man is never a religion vacuum. If there is the absence of the truth, there is always the presence of the false." Paul develops the false in the next verses, the consequences of unbelief, in verses 22 and 23. "Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures." That's the religion of the Gentile, the heathen - paganism of the ancient world.

Unbelief results in absolute folly. What could be more foolish than exchanging the glory of the incorruptible God, which has been clearly seen, for things and animals and gods of man's own imagination? But that was the ancient pagan world. That was heathenism.

Some of those ancient civilizations had remarkable achievements. The Egyptians, for example, had a genius for

engineering, and advanced in certain sciences, if you've been to that land and you've seen the pyramids and entered into them. You're amazed at what they did. I have stood in one of the great pyramids in Giza and was amazed at the massive stones and the precision with which they were cut and set. It looked like something that had been done in modern times.

These are ancient people who had a genius for engineering, and yet, the same people who built the pyramids worshipped as god everything that moved, from the River Nile to the dung beetle. Those were their gods. It shows how foolish men become when they turn from the living God and reject His light. Without God's revelation, man lives in error. His heart is darkened and foolish.

A popular view of the history of religion is that it evolved from the primitive to the sophisticated, from nature worship, from animism to polytheism, the belief that there are many gods. So man developed from believing that God is in the stones and the trees and everything around us to believing that, no, there's more than one god or the gods are in a plurality and they live above us.

And then coming to a more sophisticated view that there's only one god and they embrace monotheism. Well, that's a popular notion. You can read commentaries on this subject which will reference various anthropologists who, in their study of man and the study of the history of religion, say, "No, just the opposite is true. If you look at the study of these things, it's very clear that man began with monotheism and everything declined into polytheism and animism and all of the corrupt religions that we see."

And that is exactly what Paul is teaching. Man is not evolving spiritually. He is devolving, because he prefers darkness to light. And so we read in verse 25 that "God gave them over." He abandoned man to the consequences of his folly, and mankind descended into spiritual madness and moral corruption. That's the consequence of rejecting God's truth - sin and misery.

Modern man might look back on those old civilizations and their religions with curiosity, but I suspect that he generally gives little thought to the relevance and dismisses them as ancient history. No one today worships Jupiter, anymore than we think of the world as being flat or the center of the universe. I know there is such a thing as the Flat Earth Society, but that's an anomaly. People have advanced beyond that. We consider ourselves very sophisticated. That's what we think.

Reality is nothing has changed, not really, not essentially. In the west, people don't worship literal idols. They idolize things. They, in effect, worship material objects. They devote themselves to a job or to family, to money and pleasure.

Thirty years ago we heard the slogan "If it feels good, do it." People esteemed, they valued, pleasant feelings above all else. Well, they still do that. They may not say it that way, but that is what people do today. That is nothing more than self-worship and following the pattern of the heathen world that Paul sets forth here. It's basically the same.

The modern materialist differs very little from the ancient pagan. He's just found a different substitute for God or he has just developed different categories and he's just as thankless as the ancient heathen. Ingratitude is a terrible thing, and we sense that when we've done something nice for someone and they don't respond with any sense of gratitude. Well, how much more wicked and evil is that when man who has received everything from God shows no thankfulness at all, just ingratitude. We see that today just as much as it was seen in the ancient world.

I have a book at home on death. *How We Die* is the title. It's by a Jewish doctor, Harvard graduate, Sherwin Nuland, who is a very gifted writer and professed agnostic. One chapter begins with the quote from Hippocrates, "Man is an obligate aerobe." Which means, "Man is dependent on air." In order to live, we must have air. He

states that as a fact, which is known to all of us. It's nothing new in that.

But does he then pause to give thanks to God for the air that we have? He doesn't even acknowledge God's existence. Air is so common on earth, so fundamental, that we hardly give a thought to it. But where else do we find air? The universe is a giant vacuum with specks of light, but it is a giant vacuum. We know of no other place where air exists but on planet earth. Yet men breathe it every day without giving a thought to it, without giving a thought to the one who's giving it.

Air is just one example of the evidence of God's divine nature, as Paul puts it, of His attributes, His wisdom, His goodness, His power. Air exists in a giant vacuum, which is the universe. God made it out of nothing. And we can't manufacture it. We can't produce it. We can't invent it. It is exceedingly rare. It's found nowhere else and absolutely essential, but men constantly breathe it every day - breathe it in without breathing out a word of thanks to God.

Materialists dismisses it as the product of the Big Bang, something like that. Man today is no different from the old heathen who did not honor God or give thanks. And the result will be the same. Turning from God, rejecting His light always results in moral decline and inexcusable guilt. The modern world is as universally guilty as the ancient world was, and God's wrath is against it too.

And man can't change. This is our condition. We can't change it. In all of this, man is only acting consistent with his nature, because when Adam broke with God, he fell and all mankind is born into that fallen, sinful condition.

Luther had a great deal to say about this. In writing about the heart of man, he described it, the mind and the will, as curved in on itself. Man thinks - he thinks about himself, because he's curved in on himself, so man puts himself in the place of everything, even in the place of God. Man naturally sees nothing as more important than himself and is a slave in that condition - can't change it.

That's not only what Luther taught. That is what the Bible teaches. Later on in 8:7, 8, Paul makes that very plain. He writes "the mind set on the flesh" - that is, the natural mind, the mind of the unbeliever - "is hostile toward God; for it does not subject itself to the law of God." Well, that's what we've been talking about. "Does not subject itself to the law of God." It seeks its own autonomy, to be a law to itself, a self-directed being. It does not, it will not, subject itself to the law of God, but Paul goes on to add to that that the mind set on the flesh is not even able to do so. It cannot subject itself. It will not, because it cannot.

Jeremiah asked can the leopard change its spots? It's a rhetorical question and the answer is obviously no. A leopard can't change its spots. It can't change what it is. Point is, man can't change his heart. That's a terrible condition to be in and it is a perilous condition. And that is what Paul is saying, that man is not only guilty, he is helpless. He desperately needs the grace of God, the righteousness of God that is revealed in the gospel. That can change things, because, as Paul said, it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes. It makes the crooked straight.

In Luke chapter 13, there is the account of a woman who came into a synagogue on a Sabbath day while Jesus was teaching. And she was in terrible shape. She was bent over; she couldn't straighten up at all. She could only look down. Every step she took, she looked down at her feet. She looked down at the ground. She could not straighten up and she had been in the terrible condition for 18 years, was helpless. Jesus saw her; He laid His hands on her and, Luke writes, immediately she was made erect again and began glorifying God. That's what Christ does. That woman couldn't do it, but Christ could. Christ took the initiative and He changed her.

That's the power of the gospel. Man can't straighten the heart that is curved in on itself - the fallen nature. But Christ can. And not only that, He can make that heart to glorify God gladly and be truly thankful. He did that to Paul, and He does it for all who hear the

gospel and believe. That's how it happens, through the hearing of the gospel, the good news that God gives righteousness to all who believe.

Now could God do that? How can God accept as righteous those who are clearly sinful? He can do it, because the same wrath of God that is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness was revealed at Calvary against His own Son. Christ became the substitute for sinners. He bore our sin in our place so that all who believe in Him will be saved. That's the good news. It is salvation for all who believe, not all who decide to be different, all decide to turn over a new leaf and make a new start. That's impossible. We can't do that. The leopard cannot change its spots. Christ can, and that change comes through the gospel and realizing that we're helpless, that we're sinful, turning from ourselves and looking to Him.

So if you're here without Christ, text is very clear: You are lost, you are guilty, and God's wrath is against you. It's not a pleasant thing to say. It's not something I enjoy saying or want to say, but it's necessary to say it so that you will know your condition and seek the remedy, and the remedy is in the substitute. It's in Jesus Christ, who died in the place of sinners. And the moment you believe in Him, you are forgiven. Christ's death and His purity are imputed to you. You become what Paul called himself, a servant of Christ.

But what a blessed service it is. What a blessed position it is to be in, to be Christ's servant. And with that position of servant comes the greatest freedom of all. It's the servants the Christ, the bond-servants of Him who are truly free, because they're free from the power of sin. May God help you to look to Him, to believe in Him, to be freed from the penalty and the power of sin and given new life in Jesus Christ. And may God help all of us to rejoice in what we have in Christ. It's all a gift of God, and serve Him better. Let's pray.

[Prayer] Father, we do thank You for Your goodness and Your grace. We come to a text like this and we learn the source of man's terrible condition, his confusion, the darkness of his heart; it all goes back to unbelief, to rejecting the truth that You have made known that

is plainly seen in the world around us and made all the clearer in the gospel that You have given, the special revelation.

And we're reminded of the rebelliousness of man [*tape damage*] but by Your grace we've been changed and we thank You for that. We pray that our lives would increase in their gratitude and in the giving of honor to You and in faithful service. We pray these in Christ name. Amen.