

ROMANS 1:18-32

SOCIETY TRANSFORMED

“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

“For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”¹

As a young pastor, though I might occasionally make reference to this particular text, I would not have dared speak from it—the passage was thought too vivid, too graphic in its description of wickedness and depravity. However, we live in a day in which depravity and wickedness are imported into our homes as entertainment. What was once unspoken in polite society, now parades as the standard of morality for mankind in this present dying era. Even Christians seem to revel in their rebellion against godliness. It is as if the professed people of God imagine that through embracing wickedness they exalt the grace of God. Our culture has exalted tolerance and elevated compromise to a virtue.

Early in my service, I naïvely imagined that churches should influence society toward good, leading mankind to embrace righteousness and justice. One would have been on solid ground arguing that such responsibility is imposed by the command of the Master. However, during my lifetime I’ve witnessed an inversion of moral righteousness transforming society and consequently, transforming the churches. Rather than influencing society, churches today are more likely to be influenced by society—rather than being transformational, to a disturbing extent churches are being transformed. And the transformation is not for better; it is marked by a turning from righteousness even as the professed people of God embrace wickedness.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Without question many churches have been overly harsh toward selected sins, while ignoring the wicked actions and evil attitudes that are tolerated within their own congregation. Christians have too often categorized sin, defining various acts as evil to suit our own particular interests. Nevertheless, responsibility is imposed on that one appointed by God to deliver the message of life—he must expose sin, warning of its consequences while calling all people to repentance and faith. Whether the denizens of this fallen world embrace life or reject life, the servant of God has been given the apostolic charge: “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” [2 TIMOTHY 4:1, 2]. Likewise, the people of God are charged to stand with the man of God in resisting wickedness. Nor may we redefine wickedness to suit the attitude of the day. Our divine definition has been delivered through the Word of the True and Living God.

It will prove valuable for us to review the Apostle’s description of Roman society at the time he wrote; it presents a picture not unlike that presented by contemporary society. For all our vaunted technological advancement today, we struggle against the evil lurking in man’s heart. Despite having an apparently greater capacity to ensure a comfortable life, there is widespread dissatisfaction with life. People are ill at ease with their situation and uncertain of the future. Tragically, this lack of confidence, this uncertainty of the future, is infiltrating the churches, causing unrest and uncertainty for the people of God.

PICTURE OF A WICKED SOCIETY — It is a stunning list that the Apostle presents. Many of the wicked acts presented will be readily accepted as ungodly. Most Christians are prepared to acknowledge that homosexual acts are rebellion against God Himself. We don’t have too much trouble accepting more general terms such as unrighteousness, evil, malice, strife, deceit, maliciousness, haters of God, inventors of evil and faithless as worthy of condemnation. We are confident that such specific actions as murder are wicked and deserving divine censure. However, there are more than a few of these actions and attitudes that are less likely to be condemned. In fact, they may even be renamed and condoned among contemporary Christians.

Covetousness and envy are renamed and categorised as ambition and as a desire for fairness. Gossip is reimagined as “telling it like it is.” Slander has been transformed into a warning against others who fail to meet our standard. Insolence is now standing up for oneself, or perhaps it is cast as self-confidence. Haughtiness and boasting are self-promotion necessary for getting ahead in the world. Those who are disobedient to parents are simply self-assertive. To be heartless and ruthless is being strong. Thus, modern churchgoers have tacitly rewritten the Word of God, effectively creating God in their own image. The situation wasn’t that different in the day Paul wrote.

Roman society was at once highly structured and dreadfully debased. Arguably, Roman society represented the apex of culture and the nadir of morality. In that respect, it was not so terribly different from contemporary western society. The Romans valued courage—especially courage to face death without flinching; they despised those who treasured life, deeming such attitudes as unworthy of Rome. To lend one’s strength to the weak was considered foolish at best and inconsistent with Roman values. There was a structured class system maintaining rigid separation of classes, though under selected situations one might move from one class to another. Chastity was demanded of wives; but unfaithfulness for men was thought to be normal. Homosexuality was both permitted and promoted even among the senatorial class at the time Paul wrote, despite ancient censure of the practise.

While the Apostle is quite specific in naming particular sins as wicked before God—as is the responsibility of any preacher of the Gospel—there are two primary points that seem to be easily overlooked. Those issues should be noted and discussed so that we understand the depravity of mankind’s heart and so that we comprehend the offence we present to God.

First, note that *God does not discriminate between sins*—sin is wicked. Let’s recall a biblical definition of sin. We are taught, “Sin is lawlessness” [1 JOHN 3:4]. Later, John teaches, “All wrongdoing is sin” [1 JOHN 5:17]. Sin is lawlessness; all wrongdoing is sin. The concept of lawlessness brings us back to any action that transgresses the will of God. You will undoubtedly remember that the Apostle has taught us, “Where there is no law there is no transgression” [ROMANS 4:15]. If God has not positioned Himself against a particular practise, it is not sinful. Set against this general statement is the knowledge that if God has positioned Himself against a given practise, it offends His holy character. If man has offended the holiness of God, then that individual must answer for his actions.

There are individuals who argue that they can’t possibly know what is sinful. The warning that all wrongdoing is sin addresses this precise issue. Whatever is not specifically addressed by the law of God is permissible. However, the will of God is clearly revealed; man knows within himself what is right and what is wrong. However, one may stifle conscience or resist what is right to the point that she is no longer able to experience remorse or feel shame for a given action. Indeed, the Apostle warns of precisely such a day when he pens the warning, “The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared” [1 TIMOTHY 4:1, 2].

Whether an individual feels an action is right is immaterial; what is important is what is right. One of the serious problems facing contemporary Christianity is the emphasis on feelings. Modern Christians do what they “feel” is right. Consequently, and as a significant aside, worship is based on how it makes the worshipper feel rather than whether it engages the mind and brings the individual into the presence of God. Decisions within the congregation are made on how individual feels rather than what is written in the Word. Right is right, regardless of how the individual feels. Wrong is wrong, and what is wrong cannot be made right because someone feels it is right.

Again, the sinner cannot excuse himself or herself by saying, “God made me this way.” Know that God does not create wickedness. You must also know that however difficult your struggle may be, you cannot charge God with evil. Paul asks and answers that precise question. “You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory” [ROMANS 9:19-23].

The one sinning against God cannot claim that our culture has changed the definition of sin. Since sin is against God, and since God does not change, then that which is sinful remains sinful. Recall the words of James, the brother of our Lord. “Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change” [JAMES 1:16, 17]. God does not change! He declares through Malachi, “I the LORD do not change” [MALACHI 3:6].

Likewise, the sinful individual cannot plead ignorance of God's will, as we witnessed in the opening words of the text, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools" [ROMANS 1:18-22].

Those who condone particular sinful practise seek approval from others for their sinful behaviour. This second point is obvious from even a casual perusal of the text. It is not simply that those engaging in the sordid sins listed in the text are transgressing the will of God and bringing His judgement down on themselves, they compound their sinful behaviour by seeking approval from others. In contemporary language, they attempt to normalise their behaviour. That which at first left the one performing a sinful action ill at ease, becomes progressively less objectionable and less disturbing as they continue to engage in the particular sin. They grow defensive if they think someone disapproves of their behaviour. And finally, they attempt to persuade others that the sinful actions are normal and attempt to coerce approval of their action. This is the thrust of the final verse in our text. Listen as I read from one contemporary version: "They know God's justice requires that those who do such things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too" [ROMANS 1:32].²

Let me give an illustration of what I am talking about. Without question, the Bible condemns homosexual acts as sinful. Regardless of a person's personal desires, each individual is responsible to avoid acting on condemned desires. Sex outside of marriage is sinful, and all the argument in the world will not change what is written. Chuck Colson notes the change in attitude by referring to an incident that occurred recently. Those who are offended attempt to coerce compliance with their demands. Listen as I read from an article he wrote this past week.

"Kirk Cameron was once the most popular teen actor on television as the lovable Mike Seaver on 'Growing Pains.' But no longer. As most of you know by now, after a recent appearance on 'Piers Morgan Tonight,' he's been accused of intolerance, hatred, and even of being an 'accomplice to murder.' His sin? He expressed his personal opinion on homosexual behavior and same-sex marriage.

"He gave his opinion calmly and coolly, and only when asked for it by Piers Morgan. In fact, the question was what Kirk teaches his own children about homosexuality and gay marriage. Cameron even said that he would never single out homosexual behavior as being worse than anything else Scripture considers to be a sin.

"In fact, many of those who commented on the video on websites like E! Online and the Huffington Post noted that Cameron was just stating his own opinion, and he has a right to that. Even Piers Morgan, while disagreeing with his comments, said Cameron was pretty brave to stick to his guns on national television.

"But for the tweeters and organizations like the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, there was no room on public airwaves for his opinion, or for anyone else who expresses such an opinion. I know, I've been put on their hit list."³

² **Holy Bible: New Living Translation** (Tyndale House Publishers, Carol Stream, IL 2007)

³ Chuck Colson, "No Longer Surprised," Breakpoint.org, <http://www.breakpoint.org/bpcommentaries/entry/13/19070>, accessed 31 March 2012

Another example arose when Dr. Keith Ablow, a psychiatrist and Fox News contributor, wrote an article questioning the attempt by Chastity Bono to change her gender and become Chaz Bono. He wrote, “Chastity Bono, the daughter of Cher and Sonny Bono, has undergone gender reassignment surgery and now asserts she [that’s right, she] is a man... I know my thoughts on this matter will be politically incorrect, but they are entirely biologically and psychiatrically accurate... Bono is not a man. She is a woman who has undergone radical surgeries and is taking male hormones in order to look like a man. That isn’t a political position, it’s a biological reality. Chaz Bono wants to be thought of as male, but she is not male.”

Just one day after Dr. Ablow’s article was posted, it was pulled from the Fox News website without explanation. The apparent reason for this action was an uproar from the gay and transgender community, including threats of boycotts.

Only a few days prior to this, Dr. Ablow had written an article, posted on the same Fox News site, entitled, “Cameron Diaz is Right—4 Reasons Why Marriage IS a Dying Institution.” He wrote that marriage is “one of the leading causes of major depression in the nation.” He also wrote that “marriage is a dying institution ... because it inherently deprives men and women of the joy of being ‘chosen’ on a daily basis.” It was a poorly thought out opinion piece. Nevertheless, Fox news didn’t pull that article. After all, Dr. Ablow is entitled to his opinion. No rational person would attempt to silence him, even when his opinion doesn’t fit with their particular worldview. Now contrast the two incidents, separated by a matter of days. A psychiatrist can claim that marriage is a dying institution, arguing that it is the source of major depression, and that is acceptable. However, should the same psychiatrist suggest that Chastity Bono is suffering from a mental or emotional disorder (known as Gender Identity Disorder), his voice must be silenced! He is guilty of “transphobia!” No, I didn’t make up that term!

In a review of this strange situation, Michael Brown observes, “Consider the political climate in which we now live: Olympic gold medalist Peter Vidmar, the chief of the US Olympic team mission for 2012, resigned from his position under pressure from gay activists. Why? He supported Prop 8 in California, defining marriage as the union of a man and woman, and this was deemed too controversial. One week later, Rick Welts, the owner of the Phoenix Suns basketball team, openly declared his homosexuality and received nothing but praise and commendation for his candor. And ‘transitioning’ from a woman into a man gets you a spot on Oprah and David Letterman, while questioning the rightness of sex-change surgery gets you silenced.

“A queer thing, indeed, has happened to America. One can only wonder what is coming next.”⁴

I suggest that what is being witnessed is nothing less than what the Apostle has said in the text before us. Those who engage in sinful behaviour not only do so knowing that they are transgressing the Law of God, but they seek to compel agreement from others that their actions are normal. If their actions were neutral, it would not matter whether anyone agreed with them. However, because of the discomfort of their heart and knowing the disapproval of Holy God, they seek to prove the righteousness of their choice through coercion.

Isn’t this precisely the same thing that is done by “good church members” who redefine sin and call their behaviour by new names, imagining that by doing so they avoid divine condemnation? Of course, such individuals need to hear the apostolic words that follow.

⁴ Michael Brown, “From Chastity to Chaz: Thou Shalt Not Criticize,” Townhall, 19 May 2011, http://townhall.com/columnists/michaelbrown/2011/05/19/from_chastity_to_chaz_thou_shalt_not_criticize/page/full/, accessed 19 May 2011 and 31 March 2012

“You have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed.

“He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality” [ROMANS 2:1-11].

Sin is sin, whether it is in an individual who is openly defiant of God and His righteous demands, or whether it is found in one who imagines that she is pretty decent except for some minor imperfections. That which is offensive to Holy God is offensive wherever it is found.

PROGRESS OF WICKEDNESS IN SOCIETY — Until the Master returns, wickedness will continue. Evil will grow progressively more pronounced as the age moves toward its conclusion. Let me substantiate this matter by noting several cautionary statements presented in the Word. Consider Paul’s warning to Timothy previously cited. “The Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared” [1 TIMOTHY 4:1, 2].

This warning is fleshed out in Paul’s final letter to the young theologian. “Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth. Just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men corrupted in mind and disqualified regarding the faith” [2 TIMOTHY 3:1-8].

Consider an earlier statement that comes from the pen of the Apostle Paul. “Let no one deceive you in any way. For that day [the Day of the Lord] will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming. The coming of the lawless one is by the activity of Satan with all power and false signs and wonders, and with all wicked deception for those who are perishing, because they refused to love the truth and so be saved” [2 THESSALONIANS 2:3-11].

The Apostle is simply providing an expanded view of the words Jesus Himself spoke. You will no doubt remember the Master's words addressing a question from the disciples about the last days. "See that no one leads you astray. For many will come in my name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and they will lead many astray. And you will hear of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not alarmed, for this must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All these are but the beginning of the birth pains.

"Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake. And then many will fall away and betray one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise and lead many astray. And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold" [MATTHEW 24:4-12].

Undoubtedly the incidence of political and social disorder, strife and conflict are central to understanding Jesus' words. However, what is frequently overlooked is a growth in religious fervour without the transformation associated with the new life. False prophets will increase. Coercion to compel agreement with prevailing views of an increasingly religious society will become pronounced. Opposition to righteousness will become a prominent feature of the new world order. Despite this brave new world, lawlessness—rebellion against God and His holiness—will increase and many within professing Christendom will be marked by spiritual coldness. A chill will settle over the churches as people substitute the pursuit of feeling good for righteousness and as they exchange religion for relationship with the True and Living God.

PENALTY FOR A WICKED SOCIETY — The message presented might lead some to attempt to withdraw into sacred enclaves where they can silently observe the decline in righteousness. However, that would be a grave mistake. The people are God were redeemed and left in this world to shine as lights in the darkness. Let me say very clearly that when the day is darkest, the light shines most brightly. You who name the Name of Christ make a greater difference than you might ever imagine because you are salt and light. Jesus said to those who followed Him, "You are the salt of the earth" [MATTHEW 5:13]. He also said to His followers, "You are the light of the world" [MATTHEW 5:14]. Because this is true, we must embrace the command Jesus gave to those who would follow Him. "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" [MATTHEW 5:16].

Peter heard the Master when He spoke those words while seated on the side of the mountain. Perhaps those words echoed in his mind when he wrote these words to believers. "Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation" [1 PETER 2:12]. There is a day appointed when the Master will return. First, He will take His people to Himself. This is the promise we have received. "We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For this we declare to you by a word from the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the voice of an archangel, and with the sound of the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we will always be with the Lord. Therefore encourage one another with these words" [1 THESSALONIANS 4:13-18]. Rich encouragement indeed is found in this promise.

There is a warning, however, to all who are outside this holy Faith. Those who oppose righteousness and who promote the wickedness of this dying age must know that God shall hold all such people to account. Those are sobering words with which Paul begins his second letter to the Christians of Thessalonica. “We ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of every one of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring.

“This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering—since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints, and to be marveled at among all who have believed, because our testimony to you was believed” [2 THESSALONIANS 1:3-10].

Today, our Master is merciful. He calls all who are willing to turn from their wicked deeds to follow Him in righteousness. If they will not, they must face His wrath. For the One who now offers grace and mercy must then exercise perfect justice, just as He has warned when explaining the parable of the sower. “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear” [MATTHEW 13:37-43].

Without apology, I call on any who may be outside the precincts of grace to heed the call to life. Jesus, the Son of God, died because of your sin. He gave His life as a sacrifice, taking upon Himself the punishment that you deserve. He tasted death for every man, and that includes you. He did not remain dead, however. He rose from the dead, bursting out of the tomb on that first Easter Sunday. Death was conquered; Christ is the victor. He was seen by those to whom He presented Himself, those chosen for this express purpose that they might testify to His life. Then, He ascended into heaven where He is now seated at the right hand of the Father and from whence He shall come again to receive His own people.

Today, He invites you to accept the life that He alone can give—the forgiveness of sin and full acceptance into His family. This is the promise He makes, “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is my Master,’ believing in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you shall be set free. With the heart, one believes and is made right with the True and Living God, and with the mouth one confesses resulting in freedom.”⁵ Freedom from guilt, freedom from condemnation, freedom to come into the presence of the Living God as one of His beloved children, freedom to receive the divine inheritance of life and liberty—this is His offer to you. The Word of God declares, “Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord shall be saved,” [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13].

⁵ Author’s translation

And this can include you if you receive this gift of life by believing Him. I pray it is so.
Amen.