

Romans



Lesson 2: Good News and Bad News

Introduction

In this portion of Romans, Paul gives both the charter of his entire epistle and the beginning of his diagnosis of deadly ills afflicting mankind. Readers are often surprised that Paul, after beginning on such a happy note with the glory of God and the good news of the Gospel, suddenly launches into such a “negative message.” But Paul knows his business. The good news is only good news when we realize it is a message of healing for a dying race, a message of pardon for doomed men and women, a message of rescue for people in imminent danger of everlasting destruction. So Paul begins the announcement of the cure for our fragile condition with a careful description of the serious peril facing the human race due to sin. It’s not pretty, but neither is an accurate diagnosis of cancer, or some other terminal illness. However, when we have cancer, whether of soul or body, it’s better to have a good diagnosis than a wishful one so that the proper medicine can more effectively heal us.

Romans 1:16-32

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “He who through faith is righteous shall live.” 18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth. 19 For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. **20 Ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse;** 21 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 senseless minds were darkened. 22 Claiming to be wise, they became fools, 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles. 24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever! Amen.

26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, 27 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 their own persons the due penalty for their error. 28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a base mind and to improper conduct. 29 They were filled with all manner of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, they are gossips, 30 slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 Though they know God’s decree that those who do such things deserve to die, they not only do them but approve those who practice them.

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO MEDITATE UPON GOD’S WORD IS THROUGH MEMORIZATION.
A SUGGESTED MEMORY VERSE IS PRINTED IN BOLD WITHIN THE BIBLICAL TEXT
OR YOU MAY WISH TO CHOOSE A VERSE ON YOUR OWN.

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Points to Ponder

The Righteousness of God is Revealed

Romans 1:16-17 is something like the charter of the entire epistle. Paul states that through the Gospel the righteousness of God is “revealed.” The Greek term used by Paul for “revealed” is related to the word “apocalypse,” and indicates that we are confronted here with a profound and powerful truth. On this point, all Christians are in agreement. However, there is a significant difference between Catholic doctrine and the beliefs of many non-Catholics as to the nature of the “righteousness” spoken of by Paul. One very common non-Catholic view of this righteousness is that it is “imputed, not infused.” What does this mean?

In a nutshell, this non-Catholic doctrine, held by many (but not all) Protestants, holds that God “declares” us righteous in a strictly legal manner, so that we are not fundamentally changed in any way by this gift of righteousness. In other words, in coming to Christ we are not made righteous; we do not have to act righteous; and we do not have to do righteous things to be saved. We simply need to have Christ’s righteousness imputed to us, declaring us legally innocent of sin in the eyes of God. This was the view of Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and many others down to the present time. All of them agreed with the Catholic Church that the Gospel reveals the righteousness of God, but they reduced the gift of that righteousness to man to a strictly legal transaction that does not fundamentally transform us in the very core of our being. A classic image used to describe this view of justification is that of “snow on a dunghill.” According to this view, man remains, after justification, the same sinful creature he has always been, but he is now “covered” with the righteousness of Christ making him, by legal fiction, as pure as the driven snow in God’s eyes.

In stark contrast to this view is the Catholic teaching on justification, which teaches that God makes us, subjectively and personally, righteous participants in his Trinitarian life. According to this teaching, God does not merely declare us righteous; he makes us so. For, in the words of Isaiah 55:11, the word that goes forth from God’s mouth “shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and prosper in the thing for which I sent it.” In other words, what God declares to be so *is so*—not in a purely legal sense, but in reality.

When God said, “Let there be light,” there was light. When he said, “Lazarus come forth!”—Lazarus came forth, not in some abstract legal sense, but really and actually, bound in grave clothes and all. And so, when God declares us righteous in Baptism, we are made really, truly, and personally righteous by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are “new creations.” Paul himself insists on this (2 Cor. 5:17). So does John when he writes, “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are (1 Jn. 3:1). God does what he declares. In being justified by the grace of Christ, therefore, we are not merely forgiven and left unchanged; we are transformed. That is why the Apostle Peter, like Paul, insists that we have “become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). The man baptized into Christ Jesus is not, and cannot be, a merely forgiven yet still unclean creature.

First, the Bad News

Paul now presents us with a second apocalypse: he reveals the wrath of God. Paul begins his proclamation of the good news by starkly reminding us that without it there is only bad news. In this, like his master Jesus (who began his public ministry with the word “Repent!” (Mt 4:17), Paul is acting like a good physician. For of course, as is the habit of any good doctor, it is wise and necessary to conduct the examination and diagnosis first before discussing the cure. Therefore, before beginning his discussion of the glorious light of the Gospel, Paul reminds us of the pitch darkness of the human condition, and the acute danger of nothing less than hell awaiting those who are apart from the grace of God.

To that end, Paul spends the remainder of Romans 1 and (as we shall see in our next lesson) Romans 2 making this clear: The Gospel is now freely revealed to both Jew and Gentile alike; and they each stand in desperate need of that Gospel because both Jew and Gentile are under the domination of sin and therefore are justly objects of God’s wrath apart from grace.

Natural Revelation and Human Sin

Paul begins his discussion of the wrath of God with an appeal to what Catholic theology refers to as “natural revelation.” Natural revelation (and this includes natural morality) may be referred to as “what we can know about God

just by looking around at stuff.” In other words, Paul teaches (as the Catholic Church still does) that the existence of God and the basics of his moral requirements for our lives can be known by the light of natural reason, without any special supernatural revelation. Because of this, both Paul and the Church insist that it is possible for Gentiles who have never had any exposure to Jewish or Christian revelation, to nevertheless come to some sort of working knowledge of the true God.

On the up side, as Paul will point out in Romans 2, this means that Gentiles can and do act in obedience to such light as they have received, and therefore in obedience to the “Father of lights” (Rom 2:14-16). But, on the down side, this also means that Gentiles who commit sin are not merely acting in innocent ignorance; they are sinning against the natural revelation they have received, just as Jews who sin are sinning against the supernatural revelation they have received in the form of the Law and the Prophets. For this reason, Paul singles out for special condemnation “all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth” (Rom 1:18). For the root and essence of actual sin is in the will, not the intellect.

Thus, both Jew and Gentile are condemned for the same reason: they choose to reject what they know to be true. The anatomy of the various sins that flow from this fundamental choice to reject light and truth (described in the verses following Rom. 1:18) is, in a certain sense, secondary. But it is by no means static. For just as grace leads to grace and glory to glory, so sin, if not repented, leads to further and further complications and the abyss of still greater sin. So thanklessness and the refusal to acknowledge God lead inevitably to idolatry, and idolatry leads to all the sins catalogued by Paul in Romans 1:28-31, for it is impossible for man not to worship. It is only possible for man to worship either God or creatures. If we choose to worship creatures, then inevitably we begin, as a race, to live out the process of degradation that Paul describes in Romans 1. A quick glance at the evening news reveals the accuracy of Paul’s diagnosis.

Catechism Connections

- **Man’s moral life has its source in faith to God, who reveals himself to us. CCC 2087**
- **The Word of God is found in a most unique and wonderful way in the New Testament, the central focus of which is Jesus Christ. CCC 124**
- **Faith is the theological virtue by which belief in God is made possible. CCC 1814**
- **While atheism is a sin against the virtue of religion, Christians themselves are sometimes responsible for obscuring the truth about God and faith. CCC 2125**
- **Because of Adam’s sin, the world is filled with sin, and man is tempted to commit evil. CCC 401**
- **God reveals his existence to man through creation. CCC 32, 54, 1147, 287**
- **Since the Fall, men have disfigured the image of God in themselves and pursued lies. CCC 844**
- **There are many kinds of sin, often called the “works of the flesh.” CCC 1852**
- **Man possesses a moral conscience that is meant to guide him in making moral choices. CCC 1777**

Rome to Home

Called to salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, “the true light that enlightens everyone” (Jn 1:9), people become “light in the Lord” and “children of light” (Eph 5:8), and are made holy by “obedience to the truth” (1 Pet 1:22).

This obedience is not always easy. As a result of that mysterious original sin, committed at the prompting of Satan, the one who is “a liar and the father of lies” (Jn 8:44), man is constantly tempted to turn his gaze away from the living and true God in order to direct it towards idols (cf. 1 Thes 1:9), exchanging “the truth about God for a lie” (Rom 1:25). Man’s capacity to know the truth is also darkened, and his will to submit to it is weakened. Thus, giving himself over to relativism and scepticism (cf. Jn 18:38), he goes off in search of an illusory freedom apart from truth itself.

But no darkness of error or of sin can totally take away from man the light of God the Creator. In the depths of his heart there always remains a yearning for absolute truth and a thirst to attain full knowledge of it. This is eloquently proved by man’s tireless search for knowledge in all fields. It is proved even more by his search for the meaning of life. The development of science and technol-



ogy, this splendid testimony of the human capacity for understanding and for perseverance, does not free humanity from the obligation to ask the ultimate religious questions. Rather, it spurs us on to face the most painful and decisive of struggles, those of the heart and of the moral conscience.

Pope John Paul II
Veritatis Splendor, par. 1

Study Questions

It's best to read the entire Scripture readings for this lesson and Points to Ponder before responding to the study questions.

1. According to Paul, what is the “power” of the Gospel, and to whom is it available? What does Paul mean when he says, “to the Jew first and also to the Greek?” (See Rom 1:16-17; 1 Tim 2:4; CCC 60)
2. What is “the righteousness of God,” and how is it revealed? Is faith alone sufficient for salvation, according to Paul? Explain. (See Rom 1:17; 1 Cor 13:2; Jas 2:21-24; CCC 1989, *Points to Ponder*)
3. How is the revelation of God made known to those who have not yet received the Gospel? Are these people more or less responsible for their “wicked” actions? (See Rom 1:20; CCC 31-33, *Points to Ponder*)
4. Paul says “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.” What is “the wrath of God,” and to whom is it directed? (See Rom 1:18; Eph 5:5-6; Jn 3:36; *Points to Ponder*)

Summary: Lesson 2

In this lesson, we observed that:

1. Paul's "charter" for the book of Romans laid out in Romans 1:16-17 is that the righteousness of God is revealed in the Gospel and received by living, obedient faith.
2. Paul begins his revelation of the good news of the Gospel with reminders about the bad news of human sin and man's need for the Gospel.
3. Man can know about God and his moral law by natural revelation.
4. No one can escape the judgment of God because those who sin against natural revelation are as culpable as those who sin against supernatural revelation.
5. The various expressions of human sin are rooted in the fundamental choice of the human race to "worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator".
6. Paul focuses on disordered sexuality, and particularly on homosexual practice, as expressions of the disorder resulting from sin.
7. The fundamental choice to serve the creature rather than the Creator results in a darkened intellect and a corrupt will, from which issue various evil acts.

