

# Total Exchange

Preached on September 2008

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Text: Romans 1:18-25

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## **OPENING PRAYER:**

Let's pray together. Our Heavenly Father, thank you for the great privileges you have poured out upon us in this day. And for the accumulation of blessing that we experience as we gather again this Lord's day evening. Thank you that you have washed us, and made us clean through Jesus Christ. That we are able to come to you. That we are through faith in Him family. That you are our father. And we know that you love us and therefore, by Your grace, we are able to bear and to use everything you say to us. We pray, as we are around your presence tonight and under the authority of your word, that You would speak to us again. That we may thrill in your grace, and be in awe of your majesty and glory. And even by the wonder of your spirits working know both of these realities in the same place at the same time, through the same Christ. And this we pray together for his great namesake, Amen.

## **SCRIPTURE READING (AND ANNOUNCEMENTS)**

Now we're turning this evening again to Paul's letter to the Romans. We are in chapter one, and we're going to read this evening in Romans chapter one from verse 18 and the verses that follow through verse 25. You'll find the passage in the pew Bible on page 939. And it will be very helpful, I think, for you as we follow along to have your Bible open.

And as you turn there, let me draw your attention to a couple of things. First of all, to encourage you to come here to the sanctuary on Thursday evening, at seven o'clock, many of you know that we are hosting a conference for preachers and teachers. And the evening of that conference we look forward to Dr. Alister Begg, minister of Parkside church in Cleveland, Ohio, who is a longtime personal friend of mine, and probably now one of the best known preachers in the United States of America. He is heard on hundreds, if not 1000s, of radio stations. He's had an outstanding ministry in that church that was comparatively small when he went there 25 years ago. And now it's an enormous company of people with a great ministry. So seven o'clock on Thursday evening here, please do join us that should be a great evening, and encourage others to come. And join us also on the Friday evening. That's this coming Friday evening, Saturday morning, for our conference entitled The Grace of God in the Gospel, the speakers, Dr. Mark Ross, Dr. Ligon Duncan, Dr. David Jussely, and myself. And as I said, at the first service this morning, I always think of Martin Luther's famous words, that religion was never so badly

corrupted as it was by Reverend doctors. But these Reverend doctors are not of the corrupting kind. And we trust them implicitly and look forward to that.

A second thing. We have many, many children in our church, we are in the broad sense, together communally, we are expecting many more children. And as we grow, as we have young families, as we have visitors, our nursery staff are stretched to the limit, probably of their ear drums apart from their patients, and we are in great need at all the worship services of those who would minister in this way to the little ones and be an encouragement to us all. And if you're able to serve in that way, particularly at the six o'clock service, would you please contact Hannah Lampman at the church office during the course of this week.

Now, the word of God from Romans chapter one and verse 18. Paul has been emphasizing that in the Gospel, the "saving power of God is revealed". And it is revealed because "in the Gospel the righteousness of God is revealed." And so he continues:

*For 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 worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.*

### **SERMON:**

Martin Luther, to whom I've just referred, said, memorably that Paul's letter to the Romans is the "clearest gospel of them all." "The clearest gospel of them all." Of course, there is much in this letter that causes us to think. And there are many things in it that you need to think hard about before you understand, even in this passage that we've read together this evening. You would notice that of reverse from verse 18, through verse 21, begins with the little connective "for." And if we are going to be able to grasp what Paul is saying, we need to try to make sense of the connections in his logic, the rigor of his argument, the power of what he is saying. And yet nevertheless, as we saw at the end, last Lord's Day evening, there is in a very real sense, a great simplicity to the structure of Romans. Perhaps a little simplistic to put it like this, but it gives us nails on which we can hang the various things Paul is saying, He has given us His introduction. And he has told us that this is a message about the righteousness of God. And he goes on in chapter one, verse 18, to chapter three, verse 20, to explain why the gospel is so necessary. It is necessary because of the unrighteousness, the lack of righteousness in human beings. And then from chapter three, verse 21, to the end of chapter eight, he begins to explain to us how in the gospel of Jesus Christ, the righteousness that we lack has been provided, and not only provided, but begins to be worked into our lives so that we become more than conquerors through him who loved us. In chapters nine to 11, he raises questions about how this

gospel works. And in these chapters, he vindicates the righteousness of God in the way he works the gospel out through history. And then in chapters 12, through 16, he takes all this and he begins to apply it to show us how the gospel creates righteous, gracious Christ like lives so that what he said towards the end of Romans chapter eight becomes wonderfully, vividly present among God's people -- that God has destined them to be conformed to the likeness of His Son.

And so this is a massive treatise. A massive epistle. What Paul calls "my gospel." And he's really saying to us, if we are as Christian people, to be transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ, then we need a massive gospel, because that is a massive project in which God has engaged in our lives. And we are just as it were at the beginning of looking up into this Himalayan peak of gospel truth, as we come to these verses, in chapter one and verse 18. "The Gospel reveals the righteousness of God." And the reason the righteousness of God is needed is because it is so all pervasively lacking in human beings.

If you just turn for a moment to the end of this section, you will notice where Paul is going in his thinking from chapter one, verse 18, through to chapter three, verse 20. Notice what he says towards the conclusion in chapter three, verse 10. As it is written, "none is righteous, no, not one." As though he were hammering the last nail into the casket of our need and of our sinfulness. No, not one who is righteous. And then at the end of that passage, that every mouth may be stopped, verse 19, "and the whole world may be held accountable to God."

So what is beginning to do now, from chapter one, verse 18, to chapter three, verse 20, is to demonstrate by the most rigorous thinking and application of God's truth, how every single human being stands in need of the gospel, because there is "none who is righteous."

And because of that unrighteousness -- that deep need for the gospel -- because of that unrighteousness the first thing the apostle emphasizes to us here is that we need the gospel because of God's revelation of His wrath. Why do we need the gospel? Answer. Beginning of verse 18, the Gospel "reveals the righteousness of God", and we need it, "because the wrath of God is already being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness."

Now, what is this wrath of God? It is, of course, God's final judgment and condemnation of human sin. It is his rejection of all that is unholy. It is his opposition to everything that is unlike him and dishonors him. And it is finally that awful judgment that He will bring upon human sin and unrighteousness. "It's revealed", he says in verse 18, "against" that, that combination that we constantly see, that "ungodliness", that rejection of God that eventually leads to "unrighteousness."

And Paul understands that God has already given intimations of this. The flood early on in human history. A great intimation of the holy judgment of God against our sin, and yet simply an intimation of the final judgment that God will bring upon the unrighteous cosmos. Or Sodom and Gomorrah, when God reigns down holy judgment on the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Perhaps at least to me, the most vivid picture of this that we have in the whole of the New Testament is there in the book of Revelation, when on that day of judgment and wrath, men feel as though the mountains are falling in upon them, and they run to those mountains, and they cry out to the mountains, "Fall upon us, but save us from the wrath of the Lamb." Men and women sensing that for a mountain to fall upon you and annihilate you, would be preferable far to what the book of Revelation calls in Revelation chapter six,

verse 12, "the holy expression of the wrath of the Lamb of God." Oh, as Thomas Boston once said, so dramatically, "To be damned by him who came to save sinners, that would be to be doubly damned."

But you know, if we needed any persuasion, of that final judgment of God upon man's sin, we wouldn't need to look back to the flood or Sodom and Gomorrah, or even look forward to that picture in the book of Revelation, all we need to do is to look at the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. And to the fact that the whole Bible presents Jesus to us as he goes to the cross, as Peter says, "bearing our sins, our unrighteousness in his own body to the tree." What is the consequence of bearing unrighteousness before the majesty of the face of God? It is that one is forced to cry out in a sense of dereliction under the weight of that judgment, "My God. I am forsaken".

And it's because Paul understands this, that he is so passion-full about the gospel. This is what drives him on with the gospel. That he has a different view of men and women from the view that most men and women have of themselves. They do not see the cloud of judgment that falls over their heads, and is already beginning to be expressed. You notice that he's using the present tense in verse 18. And we will see God willing, next Lord's day evening, how the wrath of God is revealed in the present tense. Paul is absolutely persuaded it is being revealed.

Now, that raises questions, of course, for us. One of the questions it raises is this, how can God possibly do this? And interestingly, that's the very question that Paul seems to answer. He speaks to us about this solemn revelation of the wrath of God against our unrighteousness. And then when we say, but surely, surely, surely, I have an excuse that excuses me as an individual or excuses us, as people from this awful outpouring of God's wrath. The Apostle goes on in the second place to underscore for us our personal responsibility for that condemnation.

Notice what he says, he says, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men", because in that unrighteousness, "they suppress the truth about God." "They suppress the truth about God." And he's going on to say, essentially this, he's going on to say that God has made himself most gloriously known in the things that he has created. "What may be known about God", he says, "is plain to them", because he's made it plain to them. He actually uses a little different language in both of these expressions, and I'd rather think that what he means is God has made his revelation plain to us in everything that he has made. And that revelation has found its mark, among us, and in our consciousness. So that Paul's position is, there is no single human being surrounded and invaded by that revelation who can ever say, God did not make himself clear to me? Who can ever say, God did not reveal His Majesty or his power. God never showed me, I should worship Him. Because Paul's position is this, that God surrounds us with evidences of his creating hand, his mighty power, His goodness, His eternal majesty, His deity, as he says here. And not only so, but he has made us as His image. That's virtually the first thing that's said about us in the Bible. God said, "Let us make man male and female, let us make them as our image." And in that sense, constituted as the image of God made for fellowship with God, made for the knowledge of God, built in such a way, that the manner in which God reveals Himself to us strikes our minds and our consciences. It isn't just that we would have to escape from the world in order to escape from his revelation. We would have to, as it were, escape from ourselves. To escape from the permanent sense that God has embedded into human life. And all that we see of his majesty and power is matched by the fact that we were made for him. And as Augustine says, you remember the beginning of his confessions, "Our hearts are inevitably restless until they find their rest in Him." And when we suppress that truth -- you see -- he says, "we do it in unrighteousness and in ungodliness."

And if in your leisure you read down through these verses, you'll notice that Paul uses very strong verbs. Let me put it this way. You and I, we know many people who will say, some of them very learned people, some of them completely unlearned people. It's not very clear whether there is a God, he hasn't made himself clear. Now says the apostle, Christian people know -- better. Christian people know -- the truth. And the truth is, listen to the verbs he uses, the truth is they are suppressing the truth. The truth is they are refusing to honor God. The truth is, they are deliberately exchanging the glory of God for images, or in verse 25, the truth is, they are exchanging the truth about God for the lie. And again in verse 25, the truth is, they choose to serve the creature, rather than the Creator. Now all of those verbs are verbs of the will, you see. As Nietzsche once cried out, the philosopher, if there is a God, how can I bear not to be that God. And all of this is an illustration of one kind or another of how I make myself as Arch Bishop temple used to say, in 1000 ways the center of the world, and if need be, I will suppress from my thinking, all of the revelation of God. It's truth suppression. And it's hard work. And it's becoming even harder work. And our pharmaceutical industries are making billions of dollars in the lives of men and women with restless minds. I understand there are chemical dysfunctions that take place in human beings lives. But there are millions and millions of people who cannot find peace in this universe, partly because they have exhausted themselves suppressing the truth of God's revelation, and not least suppressing the truth of God's touching of their consciences. Do you notice what Paul says right at the end of the chapter in verse 32, isn't it? He says, although they know that God's decree is that people who live contrary to His will deserve death, they not only do them, but they give approval to those who practice them. They exchange the glory of God for images, and the truth of God for the lie. Now, if we are really Bible believing Christians, that's biblical truth. The unbeliever is going to say, but he's not made himself clear, I can't work it out. But the Apostle Paul's analysis of the situation is that that's simply a front. And that's simply a front for the truth that the heart of the problem is in the heart, and in the rebellion against God of the human heart. Man says if, if he'd only made himself clearer I would have trusted him. Ah, says Jesus, they say, "I'll believe if somebody rises from the dead" - and he rises from the dead and they have no interest or desire whatsoever to believe in Him. Now, you see that fairly frequently, some of the most famous names among atheists today, why are they so angry about God? Why are they so angry about God? It's because it's not simply a matter of the intellect. It is that the heart can suppress the truth that the intellect is scarcely capable of denying until the intellect actually begins to believe the heart of the lie.

And this is why God's judgment is just. Because God has shown himself, verse 20, to be a God of infinite eternity of majestic power, with a divine nature and worthy of honor. And men and women suppress the truth in unrighteousness. They make, says Paul, an exchange of the glory of God for images, and the truth about God for a lie. Now, those are two separate things. Let me just speak, because our time is very short, now, let me just speak about the second of those because it refers, I think, too many people we know who are not or will not, will to come to faith in Jesus Christ. They reject the truth about God for the lie. Now, what is the truth about God, they reject? Well, it's written all over their lives, my friends. This is what Adam and Eve did in the Garden of Eden, isn't it. It's exactly what they did. God set all around them this amazing revelation of His goodness, and lavished upon them the blessings of the garden and the little serpent came along and said to them, Don't tell me you've been thinking that God is good and gracious and generous. He doesn't want you to have anything in this garden. You see, God had restricted them. That might have been 45,000 trees in the garden and said, You're going to 44,999 of these trees to eat the fruit. There is one of them, don't touch it. Show me that you trust me, you love me and obey me. Just don't eat of that tree. Don't even ask me questions about it. Just trust me. When I've shown you my lavish goodness, and the serpent comes along, they believe

the lie about God. He stuck us in this garden. And he doesn't want us to have any of the blessings, any of the joy. Of course, that's the lie about God that is believed on throughout the world isn't. You come to Jesus Christ, and it will mess up your life. Trust in God and everything will be restriction. If you want to have a good time -- how many times have I heard people say, describing the previous night's activity when they got stoned, drunk out of their minds -- we went out to have a good time. What did they go out to do? Well, they might deny it to their grave, but they went out to suppress the truth about God. As they ran from their inability to find peace and joy and purpose and pleasure and solidity and poise and grace --until their minds were dead and in an alcoholic stupor in their flight from God, you see? "Exchanging the truth about God for a lie."

Just incidentally, let me point out for us as Christians, as I suppose most of us in this room this evening are, that lie doesn't go away when you're converted. Isn't that a lie that's come back into many of our lives? Maybe when something's gone wrong in life. And we suddenly think, oh, he doesn't love me. He really mean -- he's chasing me. He's punishing me. My friends, if that's true, even of Christian believers, how much more true is that of unbelievers?

So Paul speaks about God's revelation of His wrath. Paul speaks about our own responsibility for that condemnation. And then he goes on to speak, you'll notice about the tragic effects of that fatal exchange. God has revealed Himself to us and we've turned away from that revelation. And what happens? Well something happens to human beings. Something happens to ourselves, and it happens in three different dimensions.

It happens intellectually, first of all. Do you notice what he says in verses 21 and 22? "Their foolish hearts were darkened." "Their foolish hearts were darkened." And you see, this is the tragedy of the situation. The revelation of God is crystal clear. The heart of man is profoundly darkened in rebellion against God. And the tragedy of the situation is that that dark minded man thinks it's light within his mind. You remember how Jesus put it? "If what you think is the light within you is actually darkness, how great is that darkness?" And the result is that they're thinking became futile.

What does Paul mean? Does he mean there's no point in thinking No, not at all. It doesn't mean that. What he means by that is that no matter how much the man or woman who runs away from God seeks to think himself or herself to understand this universe they can never do it. Their thinking is futile. By contrast, the simplest believer, once a person becomes a believer, the amazing thing is that the believer finds the key to the universe. He or she may not know nearly enough about the universe as the non Christian. But he or she knows that this whole universe makes sense. And they have a place in it. Because it is a creation of God.

We had an amusing thing, actually, at the time, it seemed a tragic thing to me. But it was rather amusing in reflection. A number of years ago, the one computer I owned, the E key ceased to function, the E key ceased to function. Some of the family thought that this was a providence of God, because it meant I could never respond to invitations to go and speak places by saying yes, I could only say no. It was just the E key. But you see without the key I couldn't really type anything sensible-- in the English language. Or even in American, I could only write Scottish. Now you see, that's the situation. The ungodly man or woman who suppresses the truth about God has all the other keys. May be a rocket scientist. May be a tremendous intellect. This isn't a matter of intellect. It's a matter of whether you've discovered the key to the universe lies in the Lord. And then everything begins to fit into place.

And so there's an intellectual darkness, because of the darkness of the heart. And there's a moral darkness. You notice how Paul refers to it here in verses 23 through 25, as referenced to their lust, to the impurity of heart and body, to the idolatry that's so respectably rampant in the world, but because our foolish hearts are darkened we're taken in by it. Almost everything that surrounds us the voices that speak to us say, come to me and satisfaction. Come and find this and satisfaction. You need something. You see, even Madison Avenue understands that every single human being has this desperate need. But it could only be met by God, Paul is saying, and if it's not met by him, then we end up engaging in a kind of idolatry. We find ourselves obsessed by things, wanting things, being devoted to things, that at the end of the day just crumble into dust.

And, it has an emotional effect on us as well. At the end of the day, it has this emotional effect on it. I think this is a point CS Lewis makes somewhere, isn't it? He says the tragedy of the man who denies that there is a God when he finds himself faced with the glory of creation, and everything in him wants to praise and say thank you, he can't. He's got to suppress the truth in his unrighteousness because he's just said he doesn't believe in God. And everything in his own being tells him that he's suppressing the truth he really knows.

Remember my friend Don Carson, he's an outstanding New Testament scholar describing how he was driving some students somewhere, I think in England, actually, at the time. And they were discussing the existence of God. And there was a girl in the back of the car vociferously arguing against the existence of God. And then they were almost involved in a major car smash. And from the back seat of the car, he heard this unmistakable female voice cry out, "Oh God help us!" You see. Oh, God help us. And that's the situation.

Well, two things by way of application -- very simply, number one. One of the most important things for us to understand as Christian people, when we are engaged with people who are not Christians, and deliberately not Christians, we all need to understand and take confidence in this, that we know something about the unbeliever, the unbeliever is seeking to deny about himself or herself. Never forget that, no matter how intimidating an unbeliever may be. Especially when an unbeliever is intimidating and angry about your Christian faith. Never forget, that even in this there is a revelation that they are suppressing the truth. And oftentimes their anger against the Lord and against the gospel, and against the Lord's people is one of the clearest evidences that they are suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. And, and you can't live you see, you can't live consistently in God's world and deny God's person. So one of the things we're always doing as Christians, and Paul is often doing this is -- is looking for those places where those loud protestations of rejection of God are contradicted by things that are said or done, that absolutely depend on the existence of God. Actually, at the end of the day, even speaking coherently to one another depends on the existence of God. Because if you don't believe that this is a rational universe created by a rational God, there is no ultimate rationality. There is no ultimate rationality. You can't make sense of it. It's futile at the end of the day.

And then the other thing I want to see is this. What if this is true of you? I know you're here in a church on a Sunday night, and you would think it would never be true of anybody who was in a church building on a Sunday night, that they were actually running away from God. Sometimes a church is actually the safest place to hide when you're running away from God -- sadly. But you might be doing that. Someway or another God has been speaking to you in a variety of ways. Somehow or another there has been a kind of in breaking of his revelation to you. And you've realized you're actually under his judgment. But you can't tolerate being under his judgment. So what you have to do is to deny his

existence. My dear friend, when you come to recognize you're under his judgment, then -- then, and only then are you likely to seek His salvation. And Paul is telling us, "the gospel of Christ is the power of God, for salvation to everyone who believes". To you and me, also.

**CLOSING PRAYER:**

Heavenly Father, thank You for Your word and its truth and its power. We pray as we grapple with these words of the Apostle Paul. As we struggle to understand the ways in which we can apply them in our own lives and learn the truth of the gospel and think the gospel through, that we may be transformed by the renewing of our minds. And this evening, as we think about these solemn and serious matters, of men and women turning their backs on God, and the wrath of God being revealed against those who suppress the truth, Lord give us a confidence in the Gospel. Give us that confidence that comes from knowing that your Word tells us something about unbelievers that every single unbeliever will always seek to deny about themselves -- that they really do know God. And they know they're under the judgment of God. And they're denying God and running away from him. And, Lord, as you have drawn us to yourself, draw them. We're thinking of some people that we know personally, individually. We pray for them that you will draw them to faith in Christ. That all the pretense, all the barriers, all the running away, may come to an end, and that they'll come, like us, to Christ. And this we pray, for his sake. Amen.