

Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 4,

Romans 1:18-2:10

6-min. Video Overview

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All right, today we're going to look at a famous passage from the Book of Romans. But, you know, not just for what it says, but for how it says it. We're going to break down what has to be one of the most brilliant and honestly kind of sneaky rhetorical arguments you'll ever come across.

So, really, how would you even do that? How could you possibly build an argument so perfectly constructed that by the time you're done, every single person listening, I mean, no matter who they are, is caught in its logic? Well, that's exactly the challenge the Apostle Paul sets for himself here. Okay, let's dive right in. Paul kicks this whole thing off by setting up this huge cosmic-level conflict.

He basically presents two powerful opposite forces that are being revealed to the entire world. So, on one side, you have God's righteousness, which is his saving power, and that's being revealed for anyone who trusts in him. But at the very same time, something else is being revealed.

God's wrath against all human unrighteousness. And this fundamental clash, this tension between salvation and judgment, is really the engine that's going to drive his whole argument forward. So, with that big picture in place, Paul starts to build his case.

And at first, it really seems like he's aiming his argument at a very, very specific group of people. Let's see who. Paul says the root of, well, pretty much all human dysfunction is idolatry.

He makes the case that people can see the truth about God just by looking at the world, but they actively choose to swap that truth for a lie. And this one act, this corruption of worship, is what he says triggers a whole chain reaction of messed-up human behavior. And he lays it out like a three-step downward spiral.

It goes like this. First, people suppress the truth. Second, they exchange the real God for fake ones, for idols.

And third, as a direct consequence, God hands them over to the natural results of those actions. See? It's a very clear cause-and-effect progression. So, what sins does he bring up first? Well, he points to idolatry and to sexual practices that were pretty common in the Greco-Roman world at the time.

Now, for his original Jewish audience, this would have sounded like a list of Gentile sins. You know, the sins of those other people. You can almost picture them nodding along, thinking, yep, that is exactly what those people are like.

Paul is getting them to agree with him by first focusing on an outgroup. But here's the thing. Just when his audience is feeling all comfortable, maybe even a little self-righteous, the argument takes this incredibly sharp and brilliant turn.

This is where the trap is sprung. And this gets us to the real question, the one that changes everything. After building this whole case against them, who is Paul really talking to? The answer is, well, it's a masterful surprise.

And here is the big twist. As the scholar Dr. Craig Keener points out, Paul has been dropping clues this whole time. The very words he's using to describe these so-called Gentile sins are actually lifted straight from Old Testament passages that were originally used to condemn Israel's own sins.

So, for instance, when Paul says they exchanged God's glory, he's literally quoting from Psalm 106, which is all about Israel's idolatry with the golden calf. That phrase, futile in their thinking, that also echoes passages about Israel. So, for anyone in the audience who really knew their scriptures, these weren't just random descriptions of pagans; they were massive red flags pointing right back at them.

Okay, so this whole setup leads to this dramatic climax where the argument's focus just blows wide open, casting a much, much wider net. Right after he gets his audience on board with judging all those other sins, Paul suddenly pivots, and he just unleashes this long, long list of vices that are way more universal. And what's on this new list? Things like envy, gossip, slander, arrogance, even being disobedient to your parents.

I mean, come on, these aren't their sins anymore, right? These are human sins. This is the kind of stuff that would make pretty much anybody in any audience start to feel, well, uncomfortably seen. And that pivot right there is the final closing of the net.

All of a sudden, no one in the room can feel superior. By starting with sins his audience could judge from a safe distance, and then seamlessly sliding into sins that everybody commits, Paul makes sure his entire audience is now caught. The trap is complete.

So you have to ask, what's the point of all this? I mean, why go to all the trouble of building such an elaborate rhetorical trap? Well, it all serves a much, much bigger purpose. The whole point is to be a great equalizer. Paul's argument is so carefully designed to just completely dismantle any claim anyone might have to being morally superior.

He's proving that everyone, Jew, Gentile, it doesn't matter, stands on the exact same ground before God, guilty, under sin, and totally without an excuse. You can think of this entire section as the bad news. It's this carefully constructed diagnosis of the universal human condition.

And he absolutely has to deliver this diagnosis first to prepare everyone for the good news, the solution that he's about to offer. So the big takeaway here is this. If the problem, sin, is universal and it affects every single person equally, then the solution has to be universally accessible too.

By proving so masterfully that everybody is in the same boat, Paul sets up his ultimate point. Everyone has to be saved on the exact same terms, not by being good enough, but by the grace of God. And that leaves us with a final thought.

If an argument can truly level the playing field like this, if it can prove that absolutely everyone, with no exceptions, is in the same predicament, what is that change about how we see ourselves, and maybe more importantly, how we see everybody else?