

Romans 1:18-32: The Rhetorical Trap of God's Wrath

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Abstract

This lecture by Dr. Craig Keener explores Paul's argument in Romans 1:18-32, highlighting how God's wrath is presently revealed against unrighteousness and truth-suppressing idolatry. Keener analyzes how Paul constructs a strategic rhetorical trap, starting with traditional Gentile vices—specifically idolatry and sexual immorality—to gain the agreement of moralizers before expanding his critique to universal sins. By examining the historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts of Greek and Roman sexual practices, the lecture demonstrates how humanity's corruption of God's image leads to a depraved mind. Ultimately, the text argues that everyone is under sin and equally dependent on the free gift of righteousness offered through the gospel.

Outline

I. The Revelation of God's Wrath (Romans 1:18)

- **A. Contrast with God's saving righteousness (Romans 1:17-18)**
 1. Saving righteousness is revealed in the gospel for those who trust Christ.
 2. Divine wrath is revealed against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of those who reject the message.
- **B. Present and future dimensions of wrath**
 1. Future aspect of wrath relates to the day of righteous judgment (Romans 2:5, 8).
 2. Present aspect of wrath is revealed in God delivering/handing over humanity to their own sins.

II. Idolatry as the Inexcusable Suppression of Truth (Romans 1:19-23)

- **A. Human accountability based on revelation in creation**

1. God has made His power, divinity, and benevolence visible through His works.
 2. Knowledge of God is internal (made in His image) and external (testified by nature).
 3. Ignorance is no excuse; humanity is without excuse (Romans 1:20).
- **B. Historical and philosophical validation of natural theology**
 1. Greek and Roman intellectuals (e.g., Epictetus, Cicero, Seneca) argued for design over chance.
 2. Epictetus (Stoic) asserted that the structure of made objects proves the necessity of a designer.
 3. Diaspora Jewish thinkers adapted these ideas to support monotheism prior to Paul.
 - **C. The exchange of divine glory for falsehood**
 1. Humanity refused to glorify or give thanks to God.
 2. Exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for images resembling mortal creatures.
 3. Deities in Greek mythology (e.g., Zeus, Hermes) engaged in immoral acts (theft, rape, murder), which embarrassed philosophers but normalized vice culturally.

III. Paul's Strategic Rhetorical Trap

- **A. The structure of the moral ambush**
 1. Strategic focus on prototypical "Gentile sins" (idolatry, sexual vice, and homosexual behavior).
 2. Designed to win the applause and agreement of Jewish and moralizing insiders.
 3. Pivot to universal sins (Romans 1:29-31) and direct indictment of religious moralizers (Romans 2).
- **B. Biblical and historical precedents**
 1. The prophetic strategy of Amos 1:3-2:8 (judging neighboring nations before indicting Israel).

2. The pedagogical structure of the Wisdom of Solomon.
3. Use of Old Testament scriptures (Psalm 94:11, Psalm 106:20, Jeremiah 2:11, Deuteronomy 4:16-18) originally condemning Israel's sins to catch the reader's conscience.

IV. The Greco-Roman Cultural and Sexual Context

- **A. Pervasive sexual practices in the Mediterranean world**
 1. Homosexual behavior was common, largely spread through Greek cultural influence.
 2. It was typically bisexual/pederastic rather than exclusively homosexual, involving men and adolescent boys.
 3. Roman culture focused heavily on social status; active roles were acceptable with slaves, but passive roles for free citizens were legally and socially condemned.
- **B. Socio-economic factors driving sexual exploitation**
 1. High rates of female infant abandonment on trash heaps created extreme gender disparities.
 2. Abandoned infants were raised as slaves, with males used for labor and females/effeminate males for prostitution.
 3. Greek men married late (around age 30) to much younger wives, seeking other sexual outlets (slaves, prostitutes, or each other) before marriage.

V. Same-Sex Intercourse as a Distortion of the Creation Order (Romans 1:24-27)

- **A. Anthropological consequences of idolatry**
 1. Distorting the truth about God's character leads directly to distorting God's image in ourselves.
 2. God "handed them over" (delivered them) to sexual impurity and defiling their own bodies.
- **B. Same-sex relations as "against nature"**
 1. Paul relies on Jewish and creation-based theology rather than contemporary genetic concepts.

2. Employs Genesis-specific vocabulary for "male" and "female" (Romans 1:26-27; Genesis 1:27) to emphasize the complementarity designed for procreation.
3. Depicts same-sex behavior (both female and male) as a departure from the biological and spiritual design of creation.

- **C. Evaluation of modern limiting interpretations**

1. Refutation of the "pederasty-only" view: Paul addresses both male and female same-sex relations, which were not exclusively pederastic.
2. Refutation of the "idolatrous temple-prostitution only" view: There was no direct link between idolatry and homosexual behavior in the Greek world; Paul's link is theological.
3. The concept of formal "gay marriage" was virtually nonexistent in antiquity, save for mocked imperial exceptions like Nero's mock weddings.

VI. Ancient Jewish Rejection of Homosexual Behavior

- **A. Unanimous condemnation in Jewish writings**

1. Diaspora Jewish writers (e.g., Philo, Josephus, Pseudo-Phocylides) consistently rejected same-sex behavior as contrary to nature.
2. Associated these practices with the historical sins of Sodom and defined them as distinctively Gentile vices.

- **B. Lack of records in Jewish communities**

1. While other sins (adultery, murder) are documented, homosexual behavior is almost completely absent in Jewish records, highlighting distinct socialization.

VII. The Madness of Sin as Its Own Punishment (Romans 1:28, 59-64)

- **A. Moral insanity and the corrupted mind**

1. Exchanging divine truth for lies causes God to hand individuals over to irrational, untransformed desires.
2. Play on words in Greek: because humanity did not "approve" (dokimazo) holding onto the knowledge of God, God gave them over to "unapproved" (adokimos) minds.

3. This corrupted mind leads to a total loss of true reason and enslavement to passions.

VIII. Sins of the Depraved Mind and the Vice Lists (Romans 1:29-32)

- **A. Structure and function of ancient vice lists**

1. Common among ancient moralists (e.g., Philo's list of over 100 items) to drive home ethical points and arouse emotion.
2. Paul's list is structured with rhetorical variation: four basic evils, five sins, eight kinds of sinners, and four deficiencies in positive traits.

- **B. The shift to universal accountability**

1. Lists sins common to all humanity (envy, strife, gossip, slander, arrogance, disobedience to parents).
2. Highlights "boasting" as a primary target, setting up Paul's direct critique of Jewish boasting in Romans 2.
3. Humanity is morally responsible because they know these behaviors deserve death, yet they perform them and approve of others who do.

IX. Pastoral Application and Consistency in Holiness

- **A. Prototypical sins as a diagnostic setup**

1. Idolatry and homosexual behavior are selected as prototypical sins to prove universal depravity (Romans 3:23).
2. The goal is not to target specific classes of people, but to bring all people to recognize their need for the gospel.

- **B. Distinction between temptation and practice**

1. Temptation itself is not sin; Jesus Himself was tempted in all points yet without sin.
2. Celibacy and moral restraint must be supported pastorally with sympathy and community grace.
3. The pain and difficulties of dealing with deep sexual temptations are met with pastoral sympathy.

- **C. Consistency and the rejection of hypocrisy**

1. Churches must maintain consistent standards of holiness across all sins (e.g., addressing gossip and slander as seriously as sexual sins).
2. Rejecting double standards: disciplining same-sex sexual activity while ignoring heterosexual sex outside marriage or gossip is hypocritical.
3. The ultimate goal of Christian love is to nurture and guide all individuals toward maturity in Christ.