

Bad News can make Good News sweeter

September 20, 2009 - Romans 1:18-3:20

Imagine a doctor walks up to you and says one of these statements. “He’s got a pretty nasty gash on his forehead, but good news - your Dad will be fine.” “She’ll feel the effects of the crash for a day or two. But good news - we don’t see any cause for further concern about your spouse.” “There are some cuts and they’ll be sore for awhile but good news - your child is going to be okay.” How would we respond to such a statement? Would the statement itself really be good news? We’d first want to know what happened to our friend or family member before we could grasp this good news. Now listen to these good news statements preceded by the bad news.

“Excuse me, is Mr. Smith your father? He was sitting in a coffee shop when a drunk driver came crashing through the window with his Hummer. Your father was right by the shattering glass. He’s got a pretty nasty gash on his forehead, but good news - you’re Dad will be fine.”

“Excuse me, is so and so your spouse? They were involved in a serious car accident. Both vehicles were totaled. The other driver is

hospitalized. Your spouse will feel the effects of the crash for a day or two. But good news - we don’t see any further reason for concern.”

“Excuse me, are you the parents of Suzy Brown? There was an accident on the way to school today. Her bus got hit by a truck. It was a pretty solid impact and lots of glass flew around from the broken windows. Suzy got some small cuts and she’ll be a little sore. But the good news is she’s going to be okay.”

Sometimes, bad news that precedes good news can make the good news sweeter. If the doctor just gave you the good news about your loved one, without any context, the good news might not really seem that good. But if he gave you the bad news first, that can make the good news that much better.

You may have heard that the Gospel is good news. You may appreciate the Gospel as good news. But is it possible that hearing the bad news, might make the good news of the Gospel even sweeter. Last week we looked at two positive reasons why the Gospel is Good News. “It is the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes AND in it the work God does in us to make us right with Him is revealed.”

Today as we continue our study on Romans, we get to hear the Bad News. There will be some tough things in this bad news. But I want you to remember throughout that this bad news will sweeten the good news. So if you've heard the Gospel many times and perhaps its gone a little stale, this review of the bad news might rekindle your joy in your salvation. Or if you've heard the Gospel is good news but never saw how it might be good news for you, the bad news might put that into perspective. Or if you've never heard of the Gospel – we're starting at the beginning. You came at a great time. So I invite you to come along today to hear the bad news which may dramatically sweeten the good news.

Remember Paul writes to Christians in Rome – both Jews and Gentiles – likely scattered across the city – but not yet connected as a church. He's introduced himself and his love for them in Romans 1; 1-17. He declares he is not ashamed of the Gospel. Now he gets into the meat of the Gospel. He provides 3 chunks of bad news. At least 2 of these chunks apply to everyone here. So we'll look at each chunk but end by pondering the good news in light of this bad news. Then we'll respond to God who provided both the bad and good news for our

salvation. Our text today starts in Romans 1:18 in your Bibles. Or you can follow along on the insert in your bulletin.

Bad News

Bad News #1 - Holy Wrath is One of God's Attributes. (Romans 1:18a)

The wrath of God is being revealed.....We find the wrath of God in both the Old and New Testaments. In Ex. 32:9-10 God says to Moses – “I have seen this people . . . now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may not consume them.” Later in Deuteronomy 9:7-8, Moses says to the Israelites “Remember and do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness.” Jesus said in John 3:36 – He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him.” Here in Romans 1:18, Paul writes “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”

But what is the wrath of God? Theologian Wayne Grudem defines it like this: “*God's wrath means he intensely hates all sin and requires just payment for sin.*” Wrath is based on God's “truth” and “holiness”.

Wrath is the negative judgment of God, His just and true condemnation, on those who reject him. God's wrath is the reasoned and just response to unpunished sin.

But it is very easy to adopt an unbalanced view of God's wrath. One unbalanced view simply deletes God's wrath from existence. 1) *There is no such thing as God's wrath. God is just loving and accepting.*

Part of the reason people may reject the wrath of God is most of the time, human wrath is sinful. It is exercised with a "self-regarding passion." "I had a bad day at work. My kid annoys me. So I explode at them and they bear my wrath because of my bad day at work." But that's not what God's wrath is like. His wrath is the response of his holiness to wickedness and rebellion. God is loving and merciful and wrathful.

The other unbalanced view overemphasizes God's wrath. 2) *There is only God's wrath.* Some Christians only present God as wrathful. They portray God as the stern, strict, task master just waiting to strike at the slightest mistake. But that too is unbalanced. Wrath must be looked at along with His other attributes. In fact, accepting

the reality of God's wrath enhances the depth of His other attributes. Yes God has a holy wrath. He has every right to exercise or act on that wrath right now. Yet He continues to show mercy, grace, love and patience so more will come to salvation. We must not view God's wrath in isolation from His other attributes. So we need to ask the Lord right now to correct any unbalanced view of His wrath.

Then we need to ask God to help us gain ways we can see His wrath in a positive light.

One way is to recognize *God would not be worthy of worship if He did not have a holy wrath.* Why? Sin is hateful and worthy of being hated. If God was not wrathful then either He delights in sin or He is not troubled by sin (*Wayne Grudem*). Everyone wants to see some wrath poured out on the really bad people in history. Everyone wants injustice called to account. I heard that someone did a study discovering teenagers say "that's not fair" an average of 17 times a week. Don't you want to see Hitler and Stalin face God's wrath for all their crimes? As I was thinking about this, I realized I like God's wrath as long as its not directed at me.

Another way we can gain some positive perspective on God's wrath - *Christians need not fear God's wrath because Christ's sacrifice covers us. (That's next week's message).* Ephesians 2:7 We used to be by nature, objects of wrath. That's part of what makes the Gospel magnificent news.

God's wrath could be justly carried out at any time. Yet He continues to patiently bear with humankind in the hopes more will come to salvation. Every day we live is an amazing grace from God – He could end the world today.

2 Peter 3: 9-10 “The Lord is not slow about his promise as some understand slowness, but is patient toward you, not wanting anyone to perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise. (2 Peter 3:9-10).

Another way to see the positive impact of God's wrath is it motivates us to not be ashamed of the Gospel. Say we gain some understanding of the full force of God's wrath. We become convinced of the reality that it will be poured out to full measure on Judgment Day upon all those who are not covered by Christ. Those convictions

might help us get over our shame of the Gospel. The Bad news of God's wrath places the Good News of the Gospel in context. It serves as “the background to His great work of mercy.”

If we do not get this background, we come up with all sorts of twisted versions of the Gospel. So bad news piece #1. Wrath is one of God's attributes.

Bad News #2 - Immoral people live under sin and therefore under God's wrath.

(Romans 1:18-32, 3:9).

An immoral person is a person without morals. They do not live according to an agreed upon standard of behavior. But we saw last week that humans cannot be the final authority on morals. Our moral standards keep changing. When it comes to God's morals, He is the final authority. Therefore, a Biblically immoral person is someone who does not live according to God's moral law. Let's hear what Paul writes about that person in Romans 1:18-32.

¹⁸The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—

have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

²¹For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²²Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

²⁸Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³²Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

Romans 3:9 ⁹What shall we conclude then? Are we any better^{lb}? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin.

Remember, Paul is writing to Christians in Rome, the capital of the empire. He begins the bad news by discussing the dominant

culture in Rome; Gentile or non-Jewish culture that came from the Greeks. Basically, it was a pagan culture that worshipped multiple gods. There were many noble things about this culture and it could boast some significant accomplishments. But when it came to God's holiness and the worship of the one true God, they had gone way off track.

In fact, he declares they suppressed the truth about the Creator God even though the evidence of His existence could be seen everywhere in creation. Instead of rightly worshipping the Creator, they worshipped created things. One commentator puts it this way: "Like a man who willfully and perversely turns from a beautiful and pure wife to a prostitute, the Gentiles have turned away from the incorruptible Creator to pour their affections into decrepit images of men and beasts." (Paul Bartlett).

So they became spiritually blind and foolish. This was incredibly ironic because Greek culture put so much weight on intelligence. Yet in rejecting God they became fools. So God allows this pursuit. In fact verse 24 tells us God gave them over to the sinful desires of their hearts. This resulted in them exchanging God's truth

for a lie. Instead of worshipping the Creator God, they worshipped creation. They worshipped someone other than the true God.

Then God gave them over to shameful lusts. They exchanged the natural order of sexual relations for unnatural ones; women with women; men with men. I don't think Paul was pointing out homosexual behavior as the worst possible sin. I think he chose it because it was a very tangible example of how humans exchanged the natural for the unnatural. (For a further discussion on how we in the church need to repent of our harsh judgmental approach to members of the gay/lesbian community, please refer back to the March 15 message earlier this year called "looking out in prayer and ministry to gay friends and their families).

Then in verse 28, Paul describes another giving over of God. He gave them over to a depraved mind. He lists 21 behaviors that are contrary to God's moral law. Now its tempting to conclude that Paul's aim in this passage is to say "if you engage in homosexual behavior or in any of the 21 behaviors listed here, the wrath of God will fall upon you. But in fact, I think he's saying "the fact that you see this

behavior happening throughout culture is evidence that God's wrath is real.

The widespread practice and acceptance of these behaviors is evidence of God's wrath. Why? Because we're told in response to the suppression of truth God gave them over to this exchanging behavior to show them where it led. So that now the exchanged behavior is considered normal. The opposite of God's created order is considered good and right. That in itself is evidence of God's wrath. He gives a society over to its desires. In pursuing freedom from him they actually become enslaved to all the behaviors and sins talked about here.

We live in this culture my friends. We live in a nation that approves of greed, uses envy as a marketing tool, rewards gossip with high ratings , sees widespread disobedience of parents and has legalized gay marriage. It's like God has said, "you want to pursue total freedom from me? Here you go. I'll show you where that leads. We live in the society addicted to sin."

Yet the fact God allows this society to continue is another example of His great mercy. Through this sinful society, He's revealing the reality of His wrath. He calls out to us through His Word to say

“Look around you. See what people now think is good and right. I said this would be evidence of my wrath. No longer listen to those who would tell you there is no creator, there is no accountability, there is no judgment day.”

Today there is mercy. But one day the evidence of my wrath will be replaced by the exercise of my wrath. Turn to me before its too late. Those who don't are considered immoral in His sight - under sin and under His wrath.

But the passage doesn't end there. In fact, Paul has set things up to perform an incredible sting operation. Remember who he's writing to; Gentile and Jewish Christians in Rome. Gentile Christians came out of this pagan culture. Their need for salvation from the penalty and power of sin may have been incredibly obvious.

But Jews knew much more about God than the pagan Gentiles. The Jews did not engage in the immorality of the pagans. They were moral, good, decent people. They were okay, compared to those pagans.

But look at what Paul does in Romans 2:1-10.

¹You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. ²Now we know that God's judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. ³So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God's judgment? ⁴Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?

⁵But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. ⁶God "will give to each person according to what he has done."^[a] ⁷To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. ⁸But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. ⁹There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; ¹⁰but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. ¹¹For God does not show favoritism.

Bad News #3 - Moral people apart from Christ live under sin and therefore under God's wrath. (Romans 2:1-3:9).

Doesn't Paul perform an incredible sting operation here?

Imagine a moral Jew, a good person, a regular church goer. The moralist nods in agreement all the way through Romans 1. “Oh yeah Paul, I agree. Those pagans – they deserve it. They are definitely despicable and dastardly. They deserve God's wrath for all their immorality.”

“So” Paul might say if he was sitting here, “are you judging those pagans? Do you think you’re morally superior to them?”

“Well yes Paul. I know I’m not perfect. But I’m certainly not like them.”

“Actually, you’ve just proven you are like them. Oh, you might not commit the exact same sins. But a judgmental attitude is proof that you’re in as much trouble as they are.”

“What do you mean Paul?”

“Well, they only have the evidence of God’s existence through creation. You know God’s law. And yet you don’t keep all of it all the time do you? You have the law of God. You condemn others by God’s law. But you don’t keep all of God’s law.”

“But compared to them I’m not as bad.”

“Friend, God’s judgment does not depend on how well we fare compared to other people. The only comparison He’ll make is with His holy law.”

Then Paul dismantles objections every moral and good person could make until Romans 3:9. There he pronounces God’s verdict.

“What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We

have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin.” (For some more detail on Romans 3, please God’s Easter Message and Green Plans – Romans 3:9-25; <http://www.svbc.ab.ca/sermons/2009/mar/15/gods-easter-message-and-green-plans/>).

All human beings are under sin. Then in verses 10-18, Paul compiles a collection of Old Testament Scriptures to seal the case. In comparison to God’s moral law, there is no one who is completely righteous. . . . There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Then verse 19. “Now we know that whatever the law says, it say to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.” In other words, because we’re all under sin, apart from Christ, we are all under God’s holy and just wrath.

That’s the bad news; Wrath is one of God’s attributes. Immoral people are under sin and under God’s wrath. Moral people are under sin and under God’s wrath and judgment. *There is an eternal and unchangeable requirement in God’s holiness and justice*

that sin be paid for.” Grudem. So we all need a liberator. We all need deliverance from the penalty of sin hanging over us.

Good News

Romans 3:21 – But now a righteousness from God has been made known! Just like the wrath of God is being revealed, the work God can do in our lives to make us right with Him has come. NOW! But now! That’s what the rest of this letter is about. The good news of the Gospel and its implication. But this unbelievable, immeasurable, amazing good news can only be understood in light of this bad news. Next week, we will dive in to Romans 3:21-26, what Martin Luther called the most important passage in the New Testament.

How might you and I respond to this today?

Some of us very aware that we are immoral people and need a liberator. We’re unhappy pagans. We’ve been living in the slavery of Romans 1. So accept the Gospel by trusting in Christ as your Savior. If God is calling you to do that this day, will you call out to Him during our prayer time in a moment? .

Some of us broken by life – some of what you’re experiencing is because of the reality of sin in this world; the sinful actions of others. It is in these times, turn to Christ anew and afresh each day. For God is not only a God of wrath but the God of great comfort. You need His protection in this time, because when you’ve been sinned against, it is very tempting to respond back with sin. Come to Him for His comfort, compassion and protection.

Some of us good, decent, moral people need to recognize that we too are under sin and under judgment and need a liberator. Maybe we’re happy pagans. Maybe we thought good, moral, decency equaled protection from God’s wrath. But Paul just stripped that away. He’s not saying everyone’s a murderer – he’s saying everyone’s a lawbreaker – none of us keep God’s moral law 100% of the time. We don’t even keep the 10 commandments 100% of the time. Maybe God has unveiled this reality through His Word today. You too need to call out to the deliverer to save you from moralism; thinking you can somehow save yourself by good works.

Some of us need to confess our judgmental attitudes. We need that ongoing work of the Spirit in our lives to cleanse us from that looking

down tendency. Instead, we must call on Christ and His Spirit to transform us into people who look out in prayer and ministry to people trapped in Romans 1 and 2 so we can lead them to Romans 3:21 and beyond.

God's wrath is a reality; ultimately a positive one. It serves as the backdrop for God's amazing work of mercy. Heed the bad news and then let it sweeten the already delicious good news.