

Actions Speak Louder Than Words Romans 2:18-31

The occasion: part of a series on Romans

The main idea: God's actions show that he wants to save us, not punish us.

Comment: The passage begins by talking about “the wrath of God,” and it is necessary to clarify what this means – and some clarification comes as we read through the chapter. The sermon deals with a big question that we always need to consider when viewing biblical passages that suggest that God is angry, or that he wants to punish: His actions speak otherwise. The sermon does not attempt to discuss every detail in the passage. Other sermons could do that, but this one uses those details only as support for the main idea.

Paul's letter to the Romans has a number of interesting and controversial verses in it. Today I'd like to look at one of those, and I have summarized the problem by contrasting *actions* and *words*. Paul talks about a God who seems to say one thing, and yet do the opposite.

What's going on here? What is God really like?

I'd like to begin the discussion by looking at Romans chapter 1, and verse 18: **“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth.”** (NRSV)

“The wrath of God.” We don't use that word “wrath” very often nowadays, but it carries the connotation of being super-angry. The first definition in the dictionary is “strong vengeful

anger.” And the second is “retributory punishment,” that is, making somebody *pay* for what they’ve done wrong. It is related to the English word “writhe,” which means to squirm in pain. When we have wrath, we want to make somebody else writhe in pain.

So what does Paul mean when he talks about the wrath of God? One common understanding is that God is really angry about all the bad stuff that people do, and he is going to make them writhe in pain, as a punishment for all their bad stuff. People are doing all sorts of wicked things, and God is really angry about it, and he’s going to *do* something about it. As some bumper stickers have said, “Jesus is coming back, and boy, is he mad.”

Well, how mad is he? Paul says that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven. So, what exactly is being revealed about the wrath of God? What is God going to do in his wrath?

And that leads to a bit of a puzzle.

First, Paul doesn’t say much about what God is going to do to people who do wickedness.

And second, what does this have to do with the gospel? As we can see in the introduction of this letter, Paul’s letter to the Romans is about the gospel. It’s about good news rather than bad news. He announces in verse 16 that the gospel is about salvation. So why is he starting out with the wrath of God? That doesn’t sound very good.

Let’s explore these two questions. First, let’s see what Paul says God is going to do in his wrath. We can start here in verse 18: the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and wickedness. God is angry at the bad stuff that people do.

And as theologians have pointed out, we should expect a good God to be angry about bad stuff. When we see things like genocide, when the Hutus massacre the Tutsis in Rwanda, or there are massacres in Cambodia or in Sudan, or in a school in Connecticut, then it is right for us to be angry about that, and it’s reasonable for us to expect that God is angry about it, too. If we saw

one of our children inflicting pain on the other for no reason at all, then it would be right for us to be angry about it. We should have a strong moral dislike of cruelty and other wickedness.

Paul is saying that God is angry about stuff like that. Actually, we can see this without the gospel – it is part of the moral fabric of society. It is revealed from heaven to all people, all around the world. You don't have to be a Christian to be angry about senseless killings and atrocities. This is part of what we might call natural revelation. As verse 19 says, **“For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.”** Paul is not talking about Jews or Christians – he is talking about all peoples.

Verse 20: **“Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse.”** The psalms say, the heavens declare the glory of God. The universe gives us evidence that there is a creator. In the social world, we can see with our own eyes that cruelty and murder are wrong. People all around the world have a sense of right and wrong, and they get angry when other people do wrong, and if God is good, then he's going to be angry about it, too.

So Paul says in verse 20 that “they are without excuse” – even if they don't know much about right and wrong, everyone does something that even by their own definition is wrong. Evil is not just a problem “out there,” in everybody else – the problem of evil is also found inside every one of us. Paul will make it clear in chapter 3 that everyone has sinned, everyone has done something wrong.

In verse 21, Paul focuses on the sins of the Gentiles. He will get to the Jews in the next chapter, but right here he is looking at all the others, and he says, **“for though 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.”

What Paul writes here is very similar to a Jewish book of the first century B.C., called the book of Wisdom. It was apparently a common view of Jews at the time, that the Gentiles really ought to know better, and they had a chance to know better, but they turned away from it. They turned away from what God had revealed to them, and as a result, their minds were darkened. They found it harder and harder to understand what was right and what was wrong.

Verse 22: **“Claiming to be wise, they became fools; ²³and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.”** So they invented their own gods. Some of them looked like human beings, as we can see in the Greek and Roman gods. Others looked like animals, as we can see in Egypt and Canaan. And some people even worshipped snakes and crocodiles. They got further and further away from the truth.

If your god is a crocodile, then you aren't going to see much morality there. Your mind is going to be darkened, and although you might be clever at building pyramids, you are going to be missing out on the most important parts of what it means to be a human being made in the image of God.

So people turned away from God, and ended up doing more wicked things. And we should expect God to be angry about this. Verse 24 tells us what God did about it: **“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves.”**

God was so angry about it that he abandoned them, to let them fend for themselves. Look, he says, if you don't want me in your life, then I will just let you go away and suffer from the consequences. Just do the stupid stuff you want to do, and see how you like it. If you want

impurity, then have at it.

Paul gives a reason in verse 25: **“Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.”** God turned them over to the lusts of their hearts because they had chosen to reject him and to embrace something that wasn’t true.

Crocodiles and animals are not gods, but if you want to worship them, well then, go ahead. See what good that does you. If you want to worship the gods and goddesses of Greece, when they can’t even get along with each other, then go ahead, and see what kind of life that gives you. It just doesn’t make any sense, but if you can’t see that, perhaps you need to experience it for a while until you start to understand how foolish it is. Those false gods are going to bring you bad results, but if that’s what you want to do, then you can do it for a while.

But it doesn’t just stop there. Verse 26 tells us, **“For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions.”** Since they rejected God, and God’s purpose for human life, and God’s instructions for how to live, then God let them get worse and worse. Just like the Jewish book of Wisdom, Paul used the example of sexual immorality. Jews often criticized other peoples for two main sins, and they said that one led to the other: idolatry led to sexual immorality. Paul echoes that here, when he says that God gave them up to “degrading passions.”

Verses 26-27: **“Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error.”**

So we see here that God lets people do what they want, so that they will experience the results. Homosexuality is just one example. I’m sure Paul could also talk about the “due penalty”

for adultery, or pornography, or all sorts of other wrong ways of using sex. Paul is just using one example that he's pretty sure his audience will agree with. Nowadays he might have to use a different example, maybe pedophilia, but the principle is still the same: People reject God, and they end up doing wrong things, and God lets them suffer the natural consequences of what they have done.

And in verse 28, Paul for the third time says it: **“And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind, and to things that should not be done.”** God “let them have it,” by letting them do it. If that's what you want to do, then OK, try it out for a while and see what happens. And after a while I'll come back to you and ask, How's that working for you?

In verses 29 to 31 he explains some more of the results: **“They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, ³⁰slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, ³¹foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.”**

That's the end result of rejecting God, he says, and basically everybody's done it. There is no society on earth in which there is no envy, strife, gossip, pride, and so forth. The Jews liked to point their fingers at idolatry and sexual immorality, but they had problems of their own, such as coveting, boasting, and gossiping. It's all part of the same package of problems.

Further, all this is under the heading of God's wrath. And so we are ready to come back to our original question: What does God do in his wrath?

What we see revealed in nature, and what we see in this chapter of Romans, is that God lets people do the sins that they want to do. The wrath of God, as Paul describes it here, is basically a hands-off approach. There may be some future judgment and punishment, too, but

Paul isn't saying anything about it here. He can present the good news of Jesus without having to threaten anyone with future punishment. All he's saying here is that when people run away from God and construct their own societies, they don't do a very good job of it.

And Paul concludes in verse 32: **“They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.”** People know, at least they are certainly *capable* of knowing, that this approach to life does not produce the sort of relationships that we'd like to last forever and ever. Everybody has done something wrong, and nobody can claim that the universe is obligated to give them eternal life, and of course everyone does in fact die.

It is against this backdrop that Paul presents the good news. He says it is evident just by looking around us that strife and envy and murder are wrong, and yet this is the direction humanity is going in. There is breakdown in all sorts of social values and relationships. We've got trouble, serious trouble, and that is why we need to be saved. If we weren't in trouble, we wouldn't need to be rescued. But we *are* in trouble, and Jesus has in fact rescued us. He'll get to that a little bit later. So now we are addressing our second question: What does this have to do with the gospel? We can go back to verses 16 through 19 to see how Paul connects it:

Verse 16: “I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Verse 17: “For [or we might say because] in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, “The one who is righteous will live by faith.”

And then verse 18 – notice that it also starts with the word “for,” indicating that Paul is giving a reason: “[Because] the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness.”

So we can shorten these verses a little bit to see how they are connected:

16: The gospel is the power of God for salvation...

17: Because the gospel reveals the righteousness of God...

18: Because the wrath of God is [already] revealed.... [These verses, and the short version, were on a PowerPoint slide to make it easier for people to follow.]

Or maybe we could paraphrase it like this: We need some good news because we can see the bad news all around us. The gospel tells us how God sent Jesus to rescue us from the mess we are in.

If you think that humanity doesn't have any problems, or if you think we can fix these problems by ourselves, then you probably aren't ready to listen to the gospel. If you think that humanity knows how to live forever in peace and kindness, then I think you are denying the obvious. We've got some serious problems, and Paul says that gospel tells us about God's solution to the problems.

OK, but we've got a logical problem, or a conceptual problem, and that is to see what kind of God we are dealing with here. On top of the formula, he's got salvation. In the middle, he's got righteousness. And on the bottom, he's got wrath.

However, the common concept of salvation doesn't seem to work very well with the common concept of wrath. We can put the question like this: Does God want to punish people, or does he want to save them?

Actually, I'm not sure how other Christians would answer that question. Many Christians seem to want to have it both ways, and I don't see how it *can* be both ways. They might say that Jesus is trying to rescue us from the Father's wrath, but the Bible is pretty clear that the Father wants to rescue us just as much as Jesus does. But then does that mean that he is trying to rescue

us from his own punishment? That makes him sound confused, and it really hard to say that he *wants* to punish us.

To put it into a modern context, we might create a parable. I call it “the parable of the angry prison warden,” and it goes like this:

Once upon a time there was a maximum security prison filled with all kinds of rapists, murderers, and drug dealers, and they were all on death row, sentenced to death. But it was taking a really long time for their cases to be heard, and nobody had been put to death for a really long time. The prison warden was really angry about this – he was angry that the crimes were not being punished. And he was so angry that he began to take matters into his own hands. He started outside of the prison and dug a tunnel into the prison and helped everyone get out. He even gave them a key to his own home so they would have a good place to live.

And the question is, how angry was the prison warden?

I think we would have to say, Not very angry at all. The parable *says* that he was angry, but his actions speak louder than the label he was given. The extent of his anger has to be determined by what he actually did in his anger.

I think the same thing is true of God. People might *say* that God is angry about sin, but we have to ask the question of what God actually *does* in his anger. We cannot assume that his anger is like ours – we have to see what he actually *does* – *and what we see in Jesus is that God wants to rescue us*. He wants us to escape punishment, not suffer from it.

Well, then why is Paul talking about the wrath of God? I think we are seeing here a bit of clever rhetorical strategy. There were some people saying that Paul was too soft on sin, that

grace means that God just lets everybody do whatever they want. These were the hard-line people who said that God is angry about the sins of the Gentiles, and he was going to punish them all.

And Paul says, You want me to talk about the wrath of God. OK, I can do that. People are rejecting God and going into all sorts of sins. But what does God do about it? He lets them do whatever they want. Anybody looking around the world could see that much for themselves. It is not some new-fangled idea about grace that lets everybody do what they want – God has been doing that all along. It's God's idea, not Paul's.

But what about the penalty of sin? Isn't God going to punish everyone who does wrong? Well, yes, he is, and at least for now, he does it by letting people suffer the natural consequences of their own sins. Sin has its own punishment, and the gospel reveals that God wants to *rescue* people from that punishment. He is not trying to rescue people from his own wrath – he is trying to rescue them from the results of their own sins.

There are two additional factors here that Paul will explain in more detail later in the letter. First, that everybody has sinned, and if God wants to punish sinners, then that means that he's going to have to punish absolutely everybody. That's a pretty dismal concept of God.

And the second factor is everyone is a *victim* of sin, not just a perpetrator of sin. Sin is a power that enslaves people, and we all need to be rescued from it.

So Paul is saying, You want to talk about the wrath of God? Here's what God in his wrath is doing – he's letting us all suffer from the consequences of our own bad choices.

If that doesn't sound much like "wrath," then maybe that's because we have *mislabeled* God as being full of wrath. We have got the wrong word for what he's doing.

Sure, God is angry about sin, and people have willingly gone astray and gotten worse and

worse, but that does not mean that God wants to punish them. The truth is that he wants to *rescue* them from mess they have gotten themselves into. Paul has used the word “wrath,” but then he has drained much of its meaning out of the word.

And one interesting thing is that the Greek word for wrath doesn’t always mean anger – it just means a strong emotion. Most of the time it *does* mean anger, but here it seems to mean something else. God has strong emotions about us, and what does he do with that strong emotion? Don’t assume that he wants to punish us, because in his *actions* he shows us something quite different. He sends Jesus to rescue us from the mess we are in. The gospel reveals salvation to us, because God, in his righteousness, wants to rescue us from the kingdom of darkness and bring us into the kingdom of light and love.

And what does it mean for *us*? Are there evils inside of us? Is there any envy, any pride, any gossip or strife? Are we part of the problem? Well, yes, we are. If we are part of humanity, then we are part of the problem. People are trapped in a prison of sin, they are enslaved by sin – partly by their own choices, and partly through circumstances they had no control over. They are in death row, in a prison filled with people deserving of death.

And the good news is that the prison warden has built a tunnel into our prison, so that we can escape. He wants not just to let us out of prison, but he gives us the key to his own home, so that we will have a place to live. The gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

3634 words – 26 minutes