



# ROMANS: WEEK 1

STEVE WATSON | DAILY BIBLE GUIDE | 2016

I have exciting news to share – our city is almost at the bottom of a national survey about the Bible! Barna – a United States firm that researches faith, religion, and culture – releases a research brief each year on “America’s top Bible-minded cities.” They study the Bible reading habits and confidence in the Bible’s accuracy and principles in America’s 100 largest metro areas. Unsurprisingly, winners tend to be Southern Bible belt cities. And this year, our Boston to Manchester, NH region dropped to 99<sup>th</sup> place. That’s right – in 2015, we were the third to last Bible-minded city, and now, we’re second to last. We have only Albany, NY to pass before we can take the crown!

It might be surprising for you to hear from a pastor, but I see this as at least partly great news. Don’t get me wrong. I’m really committed to the Bible. Daily Bible reading was the first spiritual practice recommended to me when I became interested in Jesus as a teenager, and I’ve been at it – more or less – ever since. I’ve read every one of the Bible’s 1,189 chapters multiple times, some of them hundreds of times. I’ve taken graduate courses in Bible, studied the New Testament’s first century Greek language, and taught Bible in churches, on college campuses, and in public school classrooms.

But all that Bible reading has convinced me that long-time readers can miss the point of the whole thing, losing the forest for the trees. People read the Bible like it’s a book, rather than a library of books. Like it’s addressed to and primarily concerned with 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans rather than ancient peoples. Like it’s a rule book, or a recipe book, or a history book, rather than something more varied and more complicated and more beautiful than that.

So in our region’s relative unfamiliarity with, or perhaps disinterest in the Bible, it seems like we’re in a great position to have a fresh experience with these ancient texts – to hear their story anew, to discover what they’re telling us about Jesus, and to use them as a tool to guide our prayers, enrich our thinking, and enhance our lives. We hope this can happen for you, and that this 40 Days of Faith can help. (Just don’t tell a pollster – I’m gunning for Albany’s bottom spot!)

Our church has produced these Bible guides annually for a dozen years. Each year we take a different section of the Bible, this year in the New Revised Standard Version, and read it together in 40 daily doses. This will be followed by two sections:

- **Points of Interest**—a handful of comments, which include literary or historical notes as well as impressions, thoughts, questions, and reactions. These aren’t meant to be exhaustive or authoritative, but simply to give you some more perspective to work with as you ponder the passage yourself.
- **Taking It Home**—every day, there will be some experiments to try, or prompts for prayer. These invitations will focus on some of these areas:

- *For you:* How does this passage apply to you or your family?
- *For your six:* Consider six of your favorite people, people you interact with on a regular basis, who don't seem to have much of a direct connection to God, but for whom you are very much rooting. What does this passage have to say to them, or to you about them?
- *For our church:* How can we apply the passage corporately as a faith community?
- *For our city:* What does the passage say about or to our entire city?

The Daily Bible Guide, while it can certainly be a standalone product, is designed to be one component of a bigger package called 40 Days of Faith – a six-week faith experiment that includes sermons, small group discussions, further prayer exercises, and more. You can learn more about the full 40 Days of Faith in this year's User's Manual, available on the campus and at the website of Reservoir Church. And the guide itself is available in various forms: paper, blog, and now podcast. Look online at [www.reservoirchurch.org](http://www.reservoirchurch.org) or on my blog, <http://worldofstories.net>.

## About Romans

By the late 50s A.D. a Jewish man named Paul of Tarsus had spent twenty years travelling about the Eastern Roman empire telling people about Jesus and helping them start small house communities for people who wanted to worship and follow Jesus together. Paul hadn't yet been as far West as Rome, but the message of Jesus had preceded him there, and he was hoping to visit soon, to see these house churches, and enlist their support for a mission to the farthest reaches of the known world.

The Roman Empire was the largest in the World, just bigger than China. Rome was also the largest city in the world at this time, with a population of about a million people, so for its residents, it was the center of culture and commerce and power of the whole known world. In the late 50s, Nero was in his first decade as Emperor. When he came into power at age seventeen, it would have been with the usual fanfare. Nero would maintain and expand the peace and glory of the empire. The good news of his reign traveled through all the earth. Caesar saves! The great Roman fire of 64 A.D. hadn't occurred yet, nor had Nero's subsequent burnings of members of the new Christian sect. So Nero wasn't infamous yet, just notable. He'd reestablished chariot races and gladiatorial battles. Rumors of his prodigious sexual exploits circled about the city – his lovers are his wives, his slaves, his friends, his family members, or perhaps all of the above. At age 18, he poisoned his step-brother; by 22, he'd have his mother killed. By 31, he'd be condemned to be flogged to death by his own state, only to beat them to it by killing himself.

Male Roman citizens enjoyed relative peace and prosperity in this era, while women were literally second-class citizens, and many others – including slaves and Jews – lived as third-class outsiders in this highly status-conscious society.

It was to house churches in this city and this era that Paul wrote his letter that became known as Romans. Romans is one of seven New Testament letters scholars are sure Paul wrote, one of thirteen attributed to him. It's the longest of the bunch and historically, it's been the most important. Every big name thinker

and reformer in Christian history has had a read on Romans and lots to say about it. But, of course, they haven't all agreed on their interpretations.

Before addressing more practical concerns, Paul presents a sweeping interpretation of the meaning of the life of Jesus, placing it in Jesus' Jewish context and subversively borrowing Roman imperial propaganda to describe God's good news given through Jesus. In doing so, Paul's interested in God's story and our story, and how they intersect. On God's end, Paul says it is good news that the fulfillment of God's purposes for history and the vindication of God's character and justice have come to pass. On our end, there's good news of personal renewal, renewal of the whole Earth, and the transformation of human society as well. Followers of Jesus now find themselves part of a new community, where mutual acceptance and unity – Paul insists – are more important than status. And Paul's especially eager to see status-conscious Romans embrace this reality.

Paul is something of a cultural and historical big deal. He helped shape what it meant to be a follower of Jesus, and a community of followers of Jesus, not just in the Roman Empire, but for all of history. Yet for all that, he's kind of difficult. Sometimes he's ornery, like he's in an argument we're only hearing one side of (which is, in fact, probably the case). Sometimes he says things that seem harsh or befuddling or contradictory. His sentences and thoughts tend to run long and complicated. Take a breath, we want to say! In fact, one Pauline scholar, a man who's made a career studying these letters, wrote a book called, "Jesus Have I Loved, but Paul?" This is its own play on words with one of the most difficult passages we'll encounter in Romans, and the implication is something like, "You, Paul, can be a real pain."

That said, why Paul? And why Romans?

Did I mention that it's the most famous, most high impact take on the Jesus story ever written, not just in the Bible, but in the past two thousand years? I thought that would inspire us.

Also, in a dozen or so Bible guides, we've read poetry and history and biography but we have never dipped into these thirteen Pauline letters, and it seemed about time.

Additionally, when you get past Paul's intensity and inscrutable sentence structure, he's actually a pretty fascinating author to read. Maybe you don't want him as your friend, but there is no doubt you would follow him on Twitter! He's what some anthropologists would call a third culture person. He was born and raised Jewish, lived much of his adult life amongst Gentiles, but wasn't fully accepted or appreciated by either community. He was trained to be a conservative Bible scholar and rabbi. Yet his passion for Jesus – discovered almost despite himself – and his desire for all people to be able to access faith and community in Jesus alienated him from parts of the Jewish community. In his writings, he's consistently working out how the life of Jesus can bring joy and purpose and wellness to all people, who can then live in rich, interdependent community with one another.

Perhaps most importantly, reading Romans seemed a great way to help us discover the significance of Jesus for ourselves, and in our times, again. Perhaps we'll even fall in love with Jesus ourselves, and find some of the same joy and purpose and wellness and community that Paul's first century readers did as well.

One final note before we begin. I'm thankful for the many Bible scholars I've read over the years. These are people who have spent their careers trying to illumine these ancient texts for modern readers. Two great sources that have been particularly influential in my preparation are the published work of Robert Jewett and N.T. Wright. I'll be sharing their insights again and again – consider them credited.

Jewett, Robert. *Romans. A Short Commentary*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013.

Wright, N.T. *The Letter to the Romans*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002.

## Monday, February 15 – Romans 1:1-7

1 Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, <sup>2</sup> which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, <sup>3</sup> the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh <sup>4</sup> and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, <sup>5</sup> through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, <sup>6</sup> including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

<sup>7</sup> To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### Points of Interest:

- This is the first half of Paul's introduction, and it's a long one. In this greeting we'll read today and tomorrow, Paul crams in much of the key vocabulary and themes of his letter. Apostle, promise, gospel, God, Son, resurrection, holiness, Lord, grace, obedience of faith, called to belong (together) to Jesus Christ – it's almost like a glossary, but without the definitions.
- 'servant of Jesus Christ' – Servant, or slave, sounds undignified, but "slave of Caesar" was a common title for an official agent or messenger of the Roman emperor. By calling himself a "slave of Jesus Christ", Paul communicates both devotion and authority. This is reinforced with the word "apostle," which means "one who is sent". Paul hints at his back story, likely already known to his readers, that he had a vivid, life-changing spiritual vision of Jesus, in which he learned he would spread the word about Jesus among non-Jewish peoples. Caesar has his slaves and ambassadors, and apparently Jesus does as well, and Paul is one of them.
- 'gospel of God' – With the word "gospel" (from the Greek for "good news"), Paul continues to borrow from Roman imperial language, applying it to Jesus. The great deeds of the Emperors were called their "good news". Paul says that God has good news too, implying that it's better news, and more important.
- 'his Son, who was descended from David...' – The dense theology of verses 3-4 is likely quoting a very early bit of poetry about Jesus, something people may have recited in the first worship spaces in Jerusalem in the 30s A.D. "Descendant of David (by flesh), declared to be Son of God (in Spirit) through resurrection, Jesus our Lord." It's neat how it has both Jewish (descendant of David, Israel's greatest king) and Greek (flesh/spirit distinction) elements to it, reinforcing Paul's radically inclusive message.
- 'Jesus Christ our Lord' – Two final terms of distinction for Jesus. "Christ" is the Greek version of a Hebrew term (Messiah) for God's special person who would change history and inaugurate God's Kingdom. It's a Jewish, royal title. And "Lord", which means "master" and is a nod to one translation of the most common Old Testament word for "God." Paul has said a lot about Jesus in

a short span – God’s man, God’s Son, descendant of David, alive from the dead, giver of kindness and peace, and master.

- “Saints” – It’s what Paul calls the people connected to Jesus. It means “holy”, kind of a spiritual version of “special.” And they’re special because God loves them, all of them.

### **Taking It Home:**

*For you* – Paul calls followers of Jesus God’s beloved, belonging to Jesus, and saints. Try these images out on yourself for a minute. Do any of them provoke a response from you?

*For your 6* – Have any of your friends bought into supposed good news that isn’t serving them, that looks more like propaganda? Pray that they would discover the good news that God is alive and loves them.

## **Tuesday, February 16 – Romans 1:8-17**

**Previously, in Romans:** *Paul’s half way through a greeting to the faith communities in Rome, a greeting that doubles as an introduction for his letter’s major themes.*

<sup>8</sup> First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. <sup>9</sup> For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, <sup>10</sup> asking that by God’s will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. <sup>11</sup> For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— <sup>12</sup> or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other’s faith, both yours and mine. <sup>13</sup> I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been prevented), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as I have among the rest of the Gentiles. <sup>14</sup> I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish <sup>15</sup> —hence my eagerness to proclaim the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

<sup>16</sup> For 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. <sup>17</sup> For 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.”

### **Points of Interest:**

- ‘I thank my God... for all of you’ – The greeting morphs into a love letter for a while. Paul thanks God for these people, prays for them all the time, calls them his family, and can’t wait to come see them soon. What’s so special about them? Their faith is famous throughout the world. That sounds like an exaggeration, but Rome was the center of their known world, and it’s likely these home gatherings were talked about throughout the Empire. It’s the significance of a small business that can proudly say, “Did you realize we have a branch office in Manhattan?”
- ‘reap some harvest’ – Things take an unusual turn when Paul says he wants to visit to reap some harvest among them, as he does everywhere else he goes. What does Paul hope to get out of

them? Either this is an especially vivid way of referring to his end of their relationship of mutual encouragement (v. 12), or it hints at some other form of support he hopes to get from them, which we'll find out later is support for a mission to Spain, on the far Western reaches of the Empire. Either way, Paul asserts familiarity and even intimacy to people he's never met, highlighting the depth of connection he assumes amongst followers of Jesus.

- 'both to Greeks and barbarians' – As Paul finishes his introduction, he drops a bomb. To a Roman resident, Greeks are “us” – “the wise”, the honorable, the educated, the cultured. Barbarians are “them” – “the foolish”, the shameful, the idiots, the barely human people who lived beyond their society. Paul says he's not only connected to them all, but he owes them all. Presumably he feels he owes them all this “gospel,” this good news about Jesus.

It's hard to capture just how radical this sounds, but let's try an analogy. You get an email from someone you admire, saying he plans to visit you soon. It's all love and warmth, until he says, “I can't wait to visit your latte-sipping, liberal elite, sophisticated friends. Because then I'm going to Appalachia to find my gun-toting, meth-smoking, buddies living in a shack as well. Because we're all in this together. I owe you all the news that Jesus loves all of us. And by the way, I'm hoping you'll lend me some cash for that leg of my trip.” It's radical. And now that I've offended my entire reading audience, I'll move to my final comment.

- 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel' – Paul ends his greeting with what reads like a thesis statement. He's not ashamed of Jesus' good news, even though it puts him into contact with “foolish barbarians” – people considered shameful. Why? It offers everything that Rome claims to, but better, and for *all people*.

Rome's good news promise is its “Pax Romana” – peace, order, salvation from an unworthy life. One Roman ambassador wrote that the emperor was “a savior who put an end to war and will restore order everywhere”, calling that emperor “the god” whose birthday was “the beginning of the gospel he brought.” By calling Jesus' good news “the power of God for salvation”, Paul implies that the civic religion of Rome is counterfeit, and that Jesus is the one making all things right, for all people who have faith.

- 'in it the righteousness of God is revealed' – One more part of the story – this is good news for God too. Jesus' story shows God is righteous, which means something like just and dependably good rolled together. This is the God who all along, first for the Jews and then for the whole world, had promised to make all things right. Now, Paul says, it's happening.

### **Taking It Home:**

*For you* – As you start out this season, pray that your faith in the “power of God for salvation” would deepen, that you would trust that God is just and good and will prove himself to be that in your life.

*For your city and church* – A hallmark of the Jesus movement is radical inclusion and equalizing of all people. Pray that our church would be widely known for its good news in our city to people of high and low status alike, and for a community in which both are at home.

## Wednesday, February 17 – Romans 1:18-25

**Previously, in Romans:** *Paul ends his introduction by saying Jesus, not the Roman Emperor, is the just and dependable King of the world, with the good news that all people who trust him will be rescued into right-living lives, in an inclusive community of all people of faith.*

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> 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; <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools; <sup>23</sup> and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> 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.

### Points of Interest:

- ‘For the wrath of God...’ – Here’s one of those moments where Paul turns difficult. Just when we were talking about a God who rescues all people, he takes us into a discourse about all the reasons we need rescuing, and – with language like wrath, ungodliness, and wickedness – we see it’s not going to be gentle. Let’s dig in and see what we find.
- ‘those who by their wickedness suppress the truth’ – What’s the heart of the problem here? People seem to have lost God and gone sour, and it shows in our tendency to suppress the truth. What, according to Paul, is the truth we keep suppressing? That there is an invisible, but good and powerful God who made everything and cares for it. Paul thinks this is an obvious truth that people routinely resist – perhaps because we’d rather try to be big people with small gods than be small people with a big God.
- ‘his eternal power and divine nature ... have been understood’ – On the one hand, this is the broadest possible view on God in the world. All people, at all times, can see that God is powerful and good. On the other hand, Paul has a pessimistic view of human nature and human society. We consistently lose sight of what’s truest and most important in the Universe, we are prone to foolishness even when we think we’re being clever, and we’re really good at inventing fairly ridiculous objects of devotion. Taking the long view on human history, I find it’s hard to argue with any of this.
- ‘God gave them up’ – Paul says the result of all this is “the wrath of God” and God “giving us up” to how we want to live, however poorly that might go. This language has been tied to some unfortunate images over the years. We are not talking about the anger of a toddler (or me at my



worst), getting ticked off that he's not getting attention and kicking us out into the cold. After all, Paul says this is a God we'll want to honor and he himself breaks out into spontaneous worship at the end of this passage.

More thoughtful people have given us two other ways we can understand this phrase, "the wrath of God." Either God has a considered, steady anger toward human evil, injustice, and folly, and so rightly ensures we face negative consequences when we lose our way. Or the wrath of God is a metaphor for how God, in his wisdom and love, established the Universe, so that when we move away from a humble, trusting relationship with God, we experience God's absence and face the natural results of the godless existence we have made for ourselves. Both of these understandings make sense to me. Regardless, Paul views this wrath of God as a problem needing to be solved, not a situation that is desirable for either God or people.

- 'they exchanged the glory of God for images' – It's often assumed that this whole section is speaking about non-Jews, or non-Christian Gentiles, highlighting their foolishness while also revealing the judgmentalism of religious insiders. After all (spoiler alert here), Paul's going to hit that beat hard soon. When Paul talks about people "worshipping and serving" the creature rather than the Creator, he's using the exact phrase people used for respect for Greek and Roman gods and sacred objects, as well as the relatively new worship of the emperor. But his language also calls to mind important episodes from Jewish history, like the time when recently freed Hebrew slaves construct a golden calf to worship, even as they are encountering God more deeply than they had before. This tendency to prefer predictable, safe, controllable religion over a mysterious, beautiful, unpredictable God seems fairly universal.

#### **Taking It Home:**

*For you* – What do you think is most obviously true about God? What does it mean to stay responsive to this? How can you give God honor and thanks today, if that is part of your purpose as a human?

*For your 6* – Many of us, Paul says, have a small view of God, that's informed more by human images of God than the real deal. Pray that your 6 would be free from any of these broken images of God and rediscover God's power and true nature.

## **Thursday, February 18 – Romans 1:26-32**

**Previously, in Romans:** *Paul has begun a sustained argument that all people – regardless of culture or religion, supposedly foolish or wise – have backed away from an honest connection with a living God and that the results have not been pretty.*

<sup>26</sup> For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, <sup>27</sup> 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.

<sup>28</sup> 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. <sup>29</sup> They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, <sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup> 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.

#### Points of Interest:

- 'For this reason...' – LGBT people – both churchgoing and not – have experienced an immense amount of rejection from Christians. Behind this rejection have been interpretations of a handful of Bible verses that people have thought associated same-sex sexuality with God's anger or rejection. Sometimes these Bible passages have been called "clobber passages" because of the way people have been clobbered by them. Here's one of them. Let's take a careful look at some options for understanding it. No matter how you understand this passage, though – and we'll explore several options – it will be clear in the context of Romans that stigmatizing or excluding LGBT people should never be the resulting action.
- First, some assumptions of mine, shared by many scholars. 1) Whatever Paul's words might mean for us, they should have at least made sense to his original Roman audience. 2) Paul is talking about what's wrong with the world, trying to demonstrate that all people together need "the gospel of God" he began with, while also provoking the cultural religious judgmentalism he's about to critique. 3) Stigmatizing a particular group of people as especially bad sinners would run counter to one of the major themes of Romans – that we're all in this together. 4) This is a case study of humanity gone bad after God lets them have their own way; it is *not* a statement of what makes God angry or careful development of ethical principles.
- 'degrading passions' – What are these degrading passions that reduce the humanity of the participants? Bible teacher James Brownson (*Bible, Gender, Sexuality*. 2013.) wrote a pretty great book exploring this and related issues. He highlights four pairings Paul is working with that have pretty specific cultural implications – lust vs. desire (1:24), purity vs. impurity (1:24), honor and shame (1:27), and natural and unnatural (1:28). Paul isn't trying to persuade his readers here, but evoke a judgment they already have. Whatever it's a judgment against, Paul's calling it a lustful excess of desire, impure, shameful, and unnatural. This is curious, given Paul generally pushes *against* these categories of impurity and shame, both in Romans and elsewhere.
- 'exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural' – This line is probably the best evidence that Paul *could be* critiquing same-sex sexual activity both for his Roman audience and all people. The logic is that Paul is making an allusion to the Bible's origin story, in which God makes a man and a woman who are invited to partner together in filling the world with people and good work, and who become one flesh together, thus establishing the basis for marriage, co-working, kinship, and a happy sex life all at once. By this logic, men and women can stray from God and stray from the sex they were meant to have, and same-sex coupling is one example of this.

- ‘women exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural’ – So this line could refer to lesbian relationships, but it certainly doesn’t need to, and the earliest church authorities didn’t think it did. They assumed Paul was referring to women engaged in non-coital heterosexual intercourse. I’m trying not to be graphic here, but this would be sex between a woman and a man that could never result in children.
- ‘Men committed shameless acts with men...’ – Again, Paul assumes that his Roman audience of Jewish and Gentile Christians will find his case study on human brokenness compelling. Yet while male same-sex sexual relationships were rejected by Jewish culture, they were fairly widely accepted in Greco-Roman culture. But a significant amount of this sex was forced sex between free men and slaves and pederasty – man on teen and pre-teen boy sex as part of a mentoring relationship. Slaves, and lower-status Romans, would have been a significant portion of the early faith communities Paul wrote to. So for Paul to view sex with this kind of power imbalance and even violence in it as an example of human relations gone bad, his audience (and I imagine all of us) would vigorously agree.
- ‘received in their own persons the due penalty for their error’ – Paul says it will be obvious that the perverse sexuality he refers to will go badly. He also, we saw yesterday, associates it with idolatry. And we’ve seen all along that Paul is not so subtly critiquing the Roman imperial cult, arguing that Jesus, and not the emperor, is the source of good news for all humankind. The theory that best makes sense of all this evidence is that Paul has the widely rumored sexual practices of the Roman elite in mind as he writes. Rumors of the current emperor Nero’s prolific sex life, including sex with slaves and family members, may have already been circulating. And a previous emperor, Gaius Caligula (emperor from 37-41), was also widely rumored to have had sex with slaves and even his sisters. Caligula also expanded the idolatrous worship of the emperor, and so for Paul to call to mind the unnatural sex by both women and men at Caligula’s orgies, to associate it with idolatry, and to hold this up as an example of life at its worst without worshipping a living God – well, this would seem entirely natural to his audience of relatively new Jesus-followers in Rome.

Moving on from our examination of sexual perversion in ancient Rome, I hope this has given you some new ways of understanding this case study. Whatever Paul would think of loving, faithful same-sex partnerships and marriages that occur in our times, it is unlikely he had these relationships in mind when he argued that human sexuality at its most unnatural, shameful, lustful and impure condition is a tragic picture of life gone toxic without God at its center.

- ‘They were filled with every kind of wickedness...’ – Paul wraps up this chapter with one of the longest, most comprehensive vice lists in antiquity. He’s not saying that all people are like all of these things all of the time, but that the Roman rulers and by extension all of us, have become these kind of people together. These things smell like death to us when we’re honest, and yet somehow we continue to be these kinds of people and to celebrate and worship and elect people like this as well.

## Taking It Home:

*For you* – Paul’s list of folly and vice at the end here can be a little overwhelming. Scan the list in vs. 29-31 one more time, though, asking if you’re stuck in the “death” of any of these things. If so, confess that to God, and let God know you’d like help in finding another way to live. Know that God loves these moments of truth telling and is glad to forgive and empower change for you.

*For our city and church* – Please take a minute to pray for the blessing and welfare of anyone in our city who has been stigmatized and shamed by churches, including LGBT people. Pray that our church would be an inclusive and welcoming community for all people, and a church in which all of us find God’s health and wholeness for all areas of life, including our sexuality.

## Friday, February 19 – Romans 2:1-11

**Previously, in Romans:** *Paul has wrapped up a comprehensive critique of the Roman elite and all of humanity, saying people have tended to ignore God and create our own small objects of worship, so God lets us become the small and broken people we will be without him.*

2 Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things. <sup>2</sup> You say, “We know that God’s judgment on those who do such things is in accordance with truth.” <sup>3</sup> Do you imagine, whoever you are, that when you judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself, you will escape the judgment of God? <sup>4</sup> Or do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? <sup>5</sup> But by your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath, when God’s righteous judgment will be revealed. <sup>6</sup> For he will repay according to each one’s deeds: <sup>7</sup> to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; <sup>8</sup> while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. <sup>9</sup> There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, <sup>10</sup> but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. <sup>11</sup> For God shows no partiality.

## Points of Interest:

- ‘Therefore...’ – Paul goes after judging others, as if this is the natural conclusion to his own 21-point statement about everything that is wrong with humanity. This is a surprising direction in his reasoning. Again and again, we’re seeing that Romans is taking us somewhere we don’t expect. Paul isn’t summing up some obvious religious truisms, but doing something novel, something revolutionary.
- ‘you have no excuse... when you judge’ – Paul seems to take his attention away from all Romans and the world at large and direct it specifically to Roman Christians, or even more specifically Roman Jews who are part of the Jesus communities. He may be saying, “You too are full of envy,

murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, etc.” (1:29) More likely, or in addition to that, he’s saying that they may not do some of the offensive things irreligious Romans do, but their moral superiority and judgment are equally noxious to God.

- ‘you say...’ – In verse 2, Paul begins a form of rhetoric known as diatribe. Common in his time, this is developing a point by arguing with an imaginary opponent. Paul’s imaginary debater is a fellow Jew with a keen sense of personal morality and cultural superiority. Of course religious people are right to judge outsiders, the logic goes, because God judges them as well. Paul says this is a badly mistaken way of thinking. God is the judge of all people, Jew or Gentile, religious and irreligious, and the experience of God’s kindness is meant to help us turn our own lives closer to God, not to elevate us above other people.
- ‘the day of wrath, when God’s judgment will be revealed’ – A very common mode of thinking and writing in Paul’s period of Judaism was apocalyptic: the hope that God would intervene in history and change things dramatically, fulfilling his promises and setting things right. Judgment was part of this expectation. Paul mixes traditional language of wrath and judgment with what some of us think of as nearly opposite words – kindness and patience. The point again is that all people are on the same footing with God – accountable for our thoughts and actions, and recipients of God’s love and kindness that’s meant for our own connection to God and betterment, not for making us better than others.
- ‘he will repay according to each one’s deeds’ – as original as Paul’s thinking often was, he’s also constantly quoting the Old Testament, sometimes making minor changes to suit his purposes. Here he’s quoting both Proverbs 24:12 and Psalm 62:12, about how a just God sees what we do in this world and responds justly in time.
- ‘to those who by patiently doing good...’ – Verses 7-11 talk about those who do good and those who do evil in a format called chiasm – talking about the first group, then the second group, then reversing the order the second time through. It’s poetic repetition for emphasis and elaboration. Here it seems God gives people what they want in the end. Regardless of religion or status, people who do good because they want life and peace will get that from God. People who do bad because they only care about themselves will only get the sour taste of themselves and their bad living.
- ‘the Jew first and also the Greek’ – Paul is speaking to both Jews and Gentiles, inside and outside of the Roman churches. It’s hard to overstate how divided these groups were generally, and how much this divide was part of a host of social divisions in the Roman Empire. Jews in Jerusalem at this time were deeply resentful of Roman rule and fomenting revolution, which would end in crushingly tragic defeat a decade later. In Rome, Jews were expelled from the city now and then, including 10-15 years before the writing of Romans, only to be welcomed back a few years later. God is not like us, Paul says. He doesn’t divide people into social or religious or racial or cultural groupings and treat or rank accordingly. God is the perfect judge we could never find in a person, free from bias or prejudice of any kind.

## Taking It Home:

*For you* – During the 40 Days of Faith, we’re looking to connect with God’s kindness and love and provision. Take a moment now to ask to reflect on any judgment or smugness in you or in any groups you are part of. Ask God to restore you, or your group, to humility, so that you can be a recipient of God’s kindness, not God’s judgment.

*For your six* – God as judge sounds like a frightening concept to some, but most of the world for most of history has greeted God’s judgment as good news. That God will set things right in time, and will be impartial with humans, sounds like good news. Thank God that he sees each of your six honestly and fairly, and ask that they would be the recipient of God’s kindness today.

## Saturday, February 20 – Romans 2:12-16

**Previously, in Romans:** *Paul has turned his attention to religious Jews like himself, whether or not they are followers of Jesus, focusing on God’s impartiality as a judge and the importance of not judging or elevating ourselves above others.*

<sup>12</sup> All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. <sup>13</sup> For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. <sup>14</sup> When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. <sup>15</sup> They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them <sup>16</sup> on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all.

### Points of Interest:

- ‘All who have sinned apart from the law’ – God will judge people fairly. He won’t hold them accountable for standards they don’t know. But law or no law, sinning – missing God’s mark for our lives – and death (here, perishing) are closely tied together for Paul.
- ‘For it is not the hearers... but the doers...’ – It’s not what you have, but what you with do with what you have that counts. Many of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries thought that knowing God’s law made them special. Apparently action is more important than status or knowledge.
- “what the law requires is written on their hearts’ – This is an allusion to a powerful prophecy from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah. It’s a line that has come to meet a lot to Jesus followers. “‘But this is the new covenant I will make with the people of Israel after those days,’ says the LORD. ‘I will put my instructions deep within them, and I will write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.’” (Jeremiah 31:33) Paul is one of many voices indicating that Jesus has fulfilled this promise, creating a situation where people can be unusually close to God and can know God’s voice and instruction internally.

- ‘their own conscience also bears witness’ – The “they” here is likely Paul’s audience of Gentile Jesus followers, who were not born “under the law” but can know God internally and have their own conscience validate what God is leading them to do. Apparently, this isn’t always crystal clear (see the “conflicting thoughts” later in the verse), but it does seem that Paul is developing a way for non-Jews to learn to live well without assimilating all of the Jewish law.
- ‘according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge...’ – Remembering that “gospel” means good news, it is interesting that God’s coming judgment for all people is good news here. Paul says this knowledge is part of the Jesus package; a fair and just and good God who doesn’t play favorites is going to set everything right in time. And Paul’s convinced that is wholly good news.
- ‘God will judge the secret thoughts of all’ – Sometimes I find this image comforting. You can’t get anything by God, even secret thoughts. Sometimes I find it terrifying – oh, wait, even all *my* secret thoughts. Mostly, I find it provocative and sobering. I can fool everyone, but not God. He really knows me.

#### **Taking It Home:**

*For you* – Have you ever yet experienced God’s requirements being written on your heart, being sure through your conscience or in prayer that you’re not just making things up, but you know the thing God made you to do? Ask God to lead you into that kind of relationship, where “your secret thoughts” and desires will be ones that you are glad for and seem aligned with what God made you for.

*For your church/city* – Our city, really our whole region, has a historical legacy of God’s judgment being preached as if it is very scary, bad news. Pray that our church would communicate the good news that there is a living God who judges people and nations and will eventually set all things right in our world. Pray that leaders in our region would act humbly, as if they are under the authority of a just God.

### **Sunday, February 21 – Romans 2:17-29**

**Previously, in Romans:** *As Paul discusses our common human fate, how we are all accountable to God for our lives, he increasingly focuses on how little external status and privilege matters to God.*

<sup>17</sup> But if you call yourself a Jew and rely on the law and boast of your relation to God <sup>18</sup> and know his will and determine what is best because you are instructed in the law, <sup>19</sup> and if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, <sup>20</sup> a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children, having in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth, <sup>21</sup> you, then, that teach others, will you not teach yourself? While you preach against stealing, do you steal? <sup>22</sup> You that forbid adultery, do you commit adultery? You that abhor idols, do you rob temples? <sup>23</sup> You that boast in the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? <sup>24</sup> For, as it is written, “The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.”

<sup>25</sup> Circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision. <sup>26</sup> So, if those who are uncircumcised keep the requirements of the law, will not their uncircumcision be regarded as circumcision? <sup>27</sup> Then those who are physically uncircumcised but keep the law will condemn you that have the written code and circumcision but break the law. <sup>28</sup> For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. <sup>29</sup> Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

#### Points of Interest:

- ‘boast of your relation to God’ – Paul is still in his mode of diatribe, arguing with an imaginary opponent, who we’ve come to see as another Jew like Paul, but one who is fixated on his status as the guarantee of his special relationship with God. Though Paul is addressing an individual, in talking about boasting, I think he has groups in mind. Even Roman elites thought it wasn’t proper to boast too much about one’s own abilities or qualifications. That said, they had no qualms with group boasting, with insisting that one’s own culture was far greater than any others’. Jews and Gentiles alike in Paul’s era lived in honor/shame cultures, where to be of a group of higher honor or status was central to one’s identity and esteem.

A compelling contemporary philosopher, Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, has argued that our own 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture has become an honor/shame culture as well. Boasting of fame or significance is how we find our meaning and worth as well. This would explain the intense alienation and rage we see when members of society feel they have lost their place and privilege. Paul seems to find all this misguided.

- ‘if you are sure that you are a guide to the blind, and a light to those who are in darkness’ – Who would say all these such a thing? Well, some of Paul’s fellow Jews would. These five phrases Paul rattles off in vs. 19-20 were points of ethnic pride for first century Jews. Paul would have been raised to prize the moral superiority of his own people over against the Gentiles that surrounded them in the Greco-Roman rule. To be fair, anti-Semitism isn’t a modern invention. Jews were in many ways a persecuted minority in the Roman empire, and ethnic pride is both more understandable and less offensive when you’re not in a position of dominance. Still, Paul clearly is not sure that these kind of external ethnic markers are serving well the goals of connecting with God or living in diverse community.
- ‘do you steal/commit adultery/rob temples?’ Well, no Paul. The average Jew was not a temple-robbing, adulterous thief. It’s kind of an odd series of questions Paul is using to make his point. Either these are metaphorical thefts and temples and so forth, and there’s a spiritual way that Paul’s fellow Jews are guilty of these things. Or Paul’s sticking with groups, not individuals here. There were certainly Jewish thieves and temple-robbers and so forth to be found, as there were amongst every ethnicity.



That religious people are claiming to be special because of their religion is actually creating an embarrassment for God. This combination of moral smugness and hypocrisy isn't a particularly winsome combination in any religious community.

- 'circumcision indeed is of value' – Male circumcision is an ancient cultural practice, called by some the world's oldest planned medical procedure. Jews associated circumcision with their founding father Abraham and the first promises God made to them as a people. It had become one of the principal identity-marker for Jews.
- 'your circumcision has become uncircumcision' – Paul seems more neutral on the practice. If circumcision is doing something good for your heart or morality, then fine. But if it's not, don't bother. If you're standing against God – whether through your thieving and adultery or whether through your attitude of ethnic and moral superiority over others – then Paul says you might as well reattach that foreskin to your penis, for all the good circumcision is doing.
- 'real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal' – Paul completes a radical redefinition of religion, spirituality, and belonging. What makes you a Jew, Paul says, isn't any classic identity marker and isn't knowledge or tradition you've inherited. It's doing what God wants. It's a heart attitude toward God that produces God's own praise, whatever other people think about it.

#### **Taking It Home:**

*For you* – Is there anything in your religion or culture that you bank on to tell you who are? Perhaps anything that has made you feel better than people of other religions or cultures? If so, that might be a distraction or even an impediment toward God's work in you. Can you name it today, and ask God to reduce its importance to you.

*For your world* – If you're an American like me, you live in a country which has a degree of exceptionalism – the confidence that we're better than others and don't need to play by the same rules – far beyond what Paul's first century Jews had. However you're comfortable, ask that our country would take a humbler view of our place in the world. Pray too that the associations some people have between the story of Jesus and American history wouldn't drive people away from Jesus.