

True Power
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Romans 1:13-2:1

Opening: Why is it usually easier to see what's wrong with somebody else than to see what's wrong with ourselves?

The Point: The gospel is God's powerful prescription for humanity's sin problem.

Welcome to the book of Romans (Paul's letter to the church at Rome). Paul wrote Romans around AD 57–58 during his stay in Corinth. He didn't plant the church but he hoped to visit Rome as a base for ministry extending to Spain. Romans is Paul's fullest explanation of the gospel: humanity's universal problem with sin, how God makes sinners right with Himself through faith in Jesus Christ, and how those who have been saved should live. The letter answers one central question: How does the gospel change our standing with God—and then change the way we live?ⁱ

(ESV) — 13 I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, 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 well as among the rest of the Gentiles. **14** I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. **15** So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.

- In these verses we see three things:
 - Paul's desire – *"I have often intended (desired) to come to you."*
 - Paul's mission – *"I am obligated..."* (carrying the gospel to Gentiles)
 - Paul's passion – *"I am eager to preach the gospel..."*
- The Roman philosopher Seneca called Rome a *"cesspool of iniquity."* Paul knew it was his assigned mission field for the good news of Christ.ⁱⁱ
- Paul was so eager to preach the gospel because of its power.

16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. **17** For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

- *"I am not ashamed."* Considering Rome at that time, it might have been tempting to be ashamed. The gospel centered on a crucified Jewish carpenter—foolishness to the sophisticated Roman world. But Paul wasn't embarrassed by the gospel because he knew what it could do: it is "the power of God for salvation."
- We too should not be "ashamed" in our supposedly sophisticated world.
- Paul just described God's "powerful prescription" for humanity.
- What drives you crazy about pharmaceutical ads? Most ads start by describing the illness. Paul started with the prescription:

- The Gospel Prescription
 - Our problem: SIN
 - God's prescription: THE GOSPEL
 - Active Ingredients: God's POWER – not ours + Christ's RIGHTEOUSNESS – not ours
 - Take only as directed: By FAITH – not works
 - The result: Salvation we could never earn.
 - Warren Wiersbe: "The Gospel delivers sinners from the penalty and power of sin." "God didn't ask sinners to behave; but to believe."ⁱⁱⁱ
- Paul gave the prescription; next he explains why we desperately need it.

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. **19** For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. **20** For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

- God's wrath: If God loves people, why would He punish them?
- Illustration: A loving, longsuffering parent with two children – the born rebel, the "good" child. Would loving parents simply ignore destructive behavior? Would consequences mean they had stopped loving their child?
- God's wrath: Not uncontrolled anger - the just response of a holy God toward sin

21 For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. **22** Claiming to be wise, they became fools, **23** and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

- Illustration: Daughters in the 1990s - "Build a Bear" and "American Girl" dolls. *"I'll take the god who is loving and forgiving but doesn't run my life."*
- Beginning in the Garden of Eden, humanity KNEW God. Instead of honoring and thanking Him, humanity thought they knew better so they created their own gods.
- Wiersbe: *"Human history is not the story of a beast that worshiped idols and then evolved into a man worshiping one God. Human history is...the opposite..."^{iv}*

24 Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, **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.

- At some point, the loving parent lets the rebellious child feel the consequences.
- Now, here are two difficult and controversial verses for today's culture:

26 For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; **27** and the men

likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

- In our limited time and with my limited training I'm not going to get into a lengthy discussion of same-sex or transgender practices. I'll just let the text speak.
- I do want to make what I feel is a very important point about these verses.
- There are two mistakes we can make with passages like these. We can skip over what God's Word says because it makes us (or others) uncomfortable, or we can use what God's Word says as a club against others. We should do neither.
- God's Word is not a club to use on others; it is a scalpel to be used on us.

Hebrews 4:12 (ESV) — 12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

- You might wonder, "How can I stay true to Scripture without swinging it like a club?" My take: Quoting these specific verses to an unbeliever is probably not the best place to start. Start with relationship. Start with the gospel. Start with the truth that God loves them and Christ died for them. We don't have to convince people to clean up their lives before they come to Christ. Let the Holy Spirit, through the Word of God, do what we cannot do—change hearts.
- Put down the club and let the Great Physician use the scalpel.
- Same-sex practices were just ONE of humanity's sins that Paul pointed out.
- In verses 28-32 he called out: Greed, envy, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, arrogance, disobedience to parents, lack of love and lack of mercy.
- We might also want to "club" the unsaved for those sins too. Why would we be surprised when a pagan acts like a pagan? Here is where it gets personal.
- When Paul mentions those sins we might feel like he has "quit preaching and gone to meddling!" Some of those sins are a little close to home, huh?
- Fact: Christ died for all our sins. If we have received God's powerful prescription by faith, all those sins are covered by Christ's righteousness and God's grace.
- Problem: Pagans will be pagans, but saved sinners can act like pagans.
- God's Word is a scalpel; it is also a mirror (for believers), not a magnifying glass (for others) (James 1:23-25). When we look in the mirror we just might find "acceptable" sins like greed, envy, strife, deceit, malice, gossip, slander, arrogance, lack of love and lack of mercy.
- Those sins won't undo my salvation, but they CAN harm my fellowship with Christ and my relationship with others.
- Robert Murray M'Cheyne wrote: "*The seeds of all sins are in my heart, and perhaps all the more dangerously that I do not see them.*"^v
- That's why we need the mirror of God's Word and the Holy Spirit.
- Let me jump ahead to a preview of next week's text:

2:1 Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

- As I studied this text it caused me to wonder: “*If Paul was writing to Christ-followers in the new church at Rome, why did he dwell on these sins?*”
- My study led me to this answer: Because we need to understand the darkness of sin to appreciate the light of the gospel—and because it is much easier to see sin in someone else than to see its seeds in our own hearts.
- Other thoughts or questions?

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- Sin is darker and more destructive than we sometimes want to admit, but the gospel is God’s powerful prescription for humanity’s sin problem.
- The gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.”
- We don’t clean ourselves up and then come to Christ. We come to Christ by faith and receive a righteousness that isn’t our own.
- God’s Word is a scalpel and a mirror—not a club and a magnifying glass.
- Before we use Scripture to examine the sins of the world, we need to allow Scripture and the Holy Spirit to examine our own hearts.
- We shouldn’t be surprised when people who don’t follow Christ don’t live like Christ-followers. Our calling is to love them, share the gospel with them, and trust the Holy Spirit to do what we cannot do—change hearts.
- And as believers, we never outgrow our need for the gospel. The same grace that saved us continues to humble us and change us to be more like Christ.
- Christ-followers must not become self-righteous because our righteousness comes from Christ.
- Christ-followers should not be “high and mighty” but humble and grateful for the power of the gospel.

ⁱ **Dating and Geography:** David G. Peterson, *Romans* (Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary, 2021). **Purpose and Theology:** Derek R. Brown and E. Tod Twist, *Romans* (Logos Research Commentaries, 2026).

ⁱⁱ <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/romans-1>

ⁱⁱⁱ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible exposition commentary* (Vol. 1, p. 517). Victor Books.

^{iv} *ibid*

^v Andrew A. Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M’Cheyne* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 153