

The Book of Romans, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 2: The Wrath of God Against Unrighteousness

Romans 1:18–32

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Romans 1:18–32 is one of the most searching passages in Scripture on the nature and spread of human sin, and a great deal is at stake doctrinally. Paul establishes that God has revealed Himself to all people through creation (general revelation), that this leaves the whole race without excuse, and that the root of human ruin is a failure of worship: people knew God but refused to honor Him or give thanks. From that root grows idolatry, and from idolatry grows the whole catalog of unrighteousness. The teacher should be ready to explain the wrath of God rightly (not divine temper but the holy, settled opposition of a good God to evil), the meaning of the threefold God gave them up (God's judicial act of removing His restraint and letting sin run its course), and the sexual ethics of verses 26–27, which must be taught truthfully and compassionately rather than avoided or sensationalized.

This passage is also profoundly formative, though it works by humbling rather than comforting. Paul is building a case that will trap the self-righteous reader in chapter two. The teacher's task is to keep the class from reading this as a chapter about other people. The list of sins deliberately moves from the lurid to the ordinary, ending with gossip, pride, and ingratitude, so that no one in the room can sit comfortably as a spectator. Handled well, this passage produces humility, gratitude, and a fresh sense of why we need the gospel. It also calls the church to a posture that holds truth and compassion together, remembering Paul's own words that such were some of you, but you were washed (1 Corinthians 6:11).

So aim at both targets. Send students home with a clear, biblical understanding of God's wrath, general revelation, and the seriousness of sin, and send them home humbled, grateful, and tender toward those still caught in what they themselves were saved from. The disciple being formed here is not a finger-pointer but a forgiven sinner, sobered by the truth and ready to receive grace.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says, The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth (v. 18). What is the wrath of God, how is it different from human anger or mere temper, and why is a God who opposes evil actually good news rather than something to be embarrassed about?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by clearing away a caricature. Many people imagine God's wrath as a short temper, an outburst, the moody anger of a powerful being who lashes out. Help students see that this is not the biblical picture. God's wrath is His holy, settled, and just opposition to evil. It is not the loss of control but the very opposite, the steady response of perfect goodness to everything that destroys what He has made.

Show why this is actually good news. A God with no wrath would be a God who does not care. If you saw a man abusing a child and felt nothing, we would rightly question your goodness. The fact that God is angry at cruelty, injustice, and the ruin of His creation is bound up with the fact that He is good. His wrath is the shadow cast by His love for what is right.

Note that Paul says this wrath is being revealed now, in the present tense, partly through the very process he is about to describe, God handing people over to the consequences of their sin. The wrath of God is not only a future event at the judgment; it is already at work as sin is allowed to become its own ruin. This sets up the whole argument of the chapter.

Help students feel the weight without despair. The point of this opening is not to crush but to prepare. Paul is showing us the disease so that the cure, the gospel he has just announced, will look like the treasure it is. A class that grasps the seriousness of wrath will marvel all the more at grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The wrath of God as His holy, just, settled opposition to evil, not arbitrary temper
- The goodness of a God who is angry at what destroys His creation
- Present and future dimensions of God's wrath (Romans 1:18; 2:5)
- Wrath as the dark backdrop that makes the gospel shine
- The justice of God as a complement to His love, not a contradiction of it

Discussion Prompts

- Why would a God with no wrath actually be a God we could not fully trust?
- How is God's wrath different from human anger?
- How does understanding wrath rightly increase our gratitude for the gospel?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul describes people who suppress the truth they actually know (v. 18). All of us are tempted to push down what we know to be true so we can keep doing what we want. Where in your own life are you tempted to suppress something you know God has made clear, and what do you tell yourself to keep that truth at arm's length?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes Paul's word suppress and turns it on the student. Paul says people suppress the truth by their unrighteousness, literally hold it down, push it under. The striking thing is that the problem is not ignorance but resistance. They know, and they press the knowing down because the truth is inconvenient.

Help students see that this same dynamic operates in believers, not only in unbelievers. All of us are tempted to bury what we know God has made clear when obeying it would cost us something. We avoid the verse, change the subject in our own minds, stay busy enough not to think about it. The question asks for honesty about where this is happening right now.

Encourage students to notice the stories we tell ourselves. Suppression usually comes with a rationalization: everyone does it, it is not that serious, I will deal with it later, God understands. Naming the particular lie we use is often the first step toward stopping the suppression.

Move toward the light gently. The remedy for suppressing truth is not more shame but bringing the thing into the open before God, who already knows. Confession ends the exhausting work of holding the truth down. The teacher can model that walking in the light is a relief, not a threat (1 John 1:7-9).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin as resistance to known truth, not mere ignorance
- The role of rationalization in keeping sin alive
- Confession and walking in the light as the remedy (1 John 1:7-9)
- Self-deception as a danger for believers, not only unbelievers

Discussion Prompts

- What truth from God are you most tempted to push down right now?
- What rationalization do you reach for to keep that truth at arm's length?
- Why is bringing a hidden thing into the light a relief rather than a threat?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul argues that God's invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made, so that people are without excuse (vv. 19-20). What does this teach about how God has revealed Himself to everyone, and what does it mean that this leaves the whole human race without excuse?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul makes a strong claim about general revelation: God's eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. The created world is not silent about its Maker. From the vastness of the cosmos to the intricacy of a single cell, creation testifies to a

Creator of immense power and wisdom. The teacher should help students see creation as a genuine, if limited, revelation of God.

Be clear about what general revelation does and does not do. It is enough to make people accountable, to leave them without excuse, but it is not enough to save. Creation tells us that God is and that He is powerful and wise, but it does not tell us the gospel. For that we need special revelation, the word of God culminating in Christ. This distinction guards us from two errors: thinking nature tells us nothing, and thinking nature tells us everything.

Underline the phrase without excuse. This is the hinge of Paul's argument. No one can stand before God and say they had no way of knowing He existed. The evidence has been on display every day in the sky and the soil. The human problem is not lack of evidence but suppression of it (v. 18).

Connect this to evangelism and apologetics today. When people claim there is no way to know whether God exists, Paul would point them to the creation they live in every day. The honest heart, looking at the world, is drawn to ask who made it. The teacher can encourage students that creation is an ally in pointing people toward God, even before they open the Scriptures.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- General revelation, God made known through creation (Psalm 19:1-4)
- The distinction between general revelation (accountability) and special revelation (salvation)
- Human accountability, all are without excuse
- Creation as an ally in pointing people toward God
- The limits of natural revelation, it cannot by itself supply the gospel

Discussion Prompts

- What does creation tell us about God, and what can it not tell us?
- How would you respond to someone who says there is no way to know if God exists?
- Why does Paul say the human problem is not lack of evidence but suppression of it?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul says they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator (vv. 23, 25). Idolatry is not only bowing to a statue; it is treasuring anything more than God. What created things are you most tempted to put in God's place, and how would your week look different if God truly held first place?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question takes Paul's diagnosis of idolatry and brings it home. Paul says they exchanged the glory of God for images and worshiped the creature rather than the Creator. The

teacher should expand idolatry beyond carved statues. Idolatry is treasuring, trusting, or serving anything more than God, giving a created thing the place that belongs to the Maker alone.

Help students identify their functional gods. We can discern them by asking what we most fear losing, where our minds drift in idle moments, what we sacrifice most for, and what we are tempted to lie or sin to protect. Common modern idols are good things turned ultimate: family, career, money, comfort, romance, reputation, security, even ministry.

Press the contrast Paul draws. The tragedy is not only that idols are forbidden but that they are an exchange of glory for shame, of the immortal God for perishable things. Idolatry is a bad trade. We give up the fountain of living water for broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jeremiah 2:13). Naming this helps students feel the foolishness, not just the wrongness, of misplaced worship.

Move toward the constructive half of the question. What would change this week if God truly held first place? The aim is not vague guilt but one concrete reordering: a decision, a habit, a sacrifice that puts the Creator back above the creature in some specific corner of life.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Idolatry as treasuring anything above God, not only literal statues
- Functional gods, discerned by our fears, sacrifices, and daydreams
- Idolatry as a bad exchange, glory for shame (Jeremiah 2:13)
- The first place of God in the believer's affections and priorities

Discussion Prompts

- What created things are you most tempted to put in God's place?
- How can you tell what your functional gods are?
- What is one concrete way to put God back in first place this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Three times Paul says God gave them up, to impurity, to dishonorable passions, and to a debased mind (vv. 24, 26, 28). What does it mean that God gave them up, and how does this teach us that sin itself becomes a kind of judgment when God removes His restraining hand?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a crucial and sobering point of doctrine. Three times Paul says God gave them up: to the lusts of their hearts (v. 24), to dishonorable passions (v. 26), and to a debased mind (v. 28). The teacher should explain this carefully, because it is easy to misread. God did not cause their sin or tempt them to it. He removed His restraining hand and allowed them to have what they were determined to want.

Help students see that this giving over is itself a form of judgment. The most frightening thing God can do to a person bent on rebellion is to let them have their way. Sin carries its own punishment within it. The drift into deeper darkness, the hardening of the heart, the loss of the ability even to feel shame, these are not arbitrary penalties added later; they are sin allowed to ripen into its own consequences.

Note the downward direction. The passage describes a descent: from refusing to honor God, to idolatry, to impurity, to dishonorable passions, to a mind that no longer reasons rightly, to a society that applauds evil. Sin is never static. Left unchecked, it pulls a person and a culture steadily downward. This is a warning about the trajectory of unrepented sin.

Bring hope alongside the warning. The giving over is not God's last word. The whole letter exists because God has acted in Christ to rescue people from exactly this spiral. Even a person far down this road can be turned around by the gospel. The teacher should let the warning be real but not leave students in despair, since grace is coming.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God gave them up, His judicial removal of restraint, not the causing of sin
- Sin as its own punishment when allowed to run its course
- The hardening and downward trajectory of unrepented sin
- God's sovereignty and human responsibility held together
- The hope that even the spiral of sin can be reversed by the gospel

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that God gave them up, and what does it not mean?
- How is being allowed to have our own way a form of judgment?
- Where have you seen the downward trajectory of unchecked sin, and how does the gospel interrupt it?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul says that although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, and their foolish hearts were darkened (v. 21). Consider the connection Paul draws between ingratitude and spiritual darkness. How might a steady habit of thanksgiving guard your own heart, and what is one specific thing you can begin thanking God for daily?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question draws on what Paul names as the first wrong turn: although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, and their foolish hearts were

darkened (v. 21). Notice that ingratitude stands at the very head of the descent. Before the lurid sins come, there is a failure to give thanks. The teacher should let that sink in.

Explore the connection between gratitude and spiritual health. A thankful heart keeps God in view as the giver of every good gift. An ungrateful heart slowly forgets the Giver and begins to treat gifts as rights, then as its own achievements, then as gods. Ingratitude is not a small fault; it is the soil in which idolatry grows.

Make it practical. Ask students when they last felt genuine thanksgiving, not the reflex of a mealtime prayer but real wonder at God's goodness. The honest answer is often revealing. A life thin on gratitude is usually a life drifting from God, even if the outward behavior looks fine.

Offer a concrete remedy. The question asks for one specific thing to begin thanking God for daily. Encourage the discipline of deliberate thanksgiving, naming gifts out loud, keeping a short list, beginning prayers with gratitude before requests. This simple habit guards the heart against the very darkening Paul describes.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Ingratitude as the head of the descent into sin (v. 21)
- Thanksgiving as a guard for the heart and a way of keeping God in view
- Every good gift as coming from God (James 1:17)
- The connection between forgetting the Giver and idolizing the gift

Discussion Prompts

- When did you last feel genuine thanksgiving to God, and what prompted it?
- How does ingratitude open the door to idolatry?
- What is one thing you can begin thanking God for every day this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever (v. 25). What is the lie that people exchange for the truth, and why does Paul treat false worship as the root from which all the other sins in this passage grow?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul reaches the heart of the diagnosis: they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator. The teacher should help students see that this is the root sin from which all the others grow. Everything in the catalog that follows is downstream of this fundamental exchange.

Identify the lie. At its core, the lie is that we, or some created thing, can take the place of God: that we can be our own authority, define our own truth, find our own ultimate satisfaction apart from Him. It is the original temptation in the garden, you will be like God (Genesis 3:5), repeated in every generation. The truth exchanged is that God is God and we are not.

Explain why false worship is the root. We become like what we worship (Psalm 115:8). When people worship created things, they are shaped by created things, and their lives bend out of true. Idolatry is not one sin among many; it is the master sin that reorders everything else. Get worship wrong, and morality, relationships, and identity all go wrong with it.

Apply this to the modern world. Our culture rarely bows to carved idols, but it constantly exchanges the truth about God for lies: that the self is sovereign, that fulfillment is found in created things, that there is no Creator to answer to. The teacher can help students see that the contemporary moral confusion Paul's list describes still grows from the same root, a refusal to worship the Creator as God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- False worship as the root sin from which others grow
- The lie that the creature can take the place of the Creator (Genesis 3:5)
- We become like what we worship (Psalm 115:8)
- Worship as the thing that orders or disorders all of life
- The Creator-creature distinction as foundational to right living

Discussion Prompts

- What exactly is the lie that people exchange for the truth about God?
- Why does Paul treat false worship as the root of all the other sins?
- How does our culture exchange the truth about God for a lie today?

Question 8

Student Question:

At the end of the chapter Paul lists sins we are quick to condemn alongside sins we often excuse: gossip, slander, boasting, envy, disobedience to parents, ruthlessness, a lack of love (vv. 29–31). Which of the so-called respectable sins on this list do you most easily tolerate in yourself, and why is it dangerous to rank sins so that our own feel acceptable?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question targets the trap Paul is setting. After the more shocking sins, his list slides into the everyday: gossip, slander, boasting, envy, disobedience to parents, heartlessness, ruthlessness. These are the sins respectable people commit while feeling quite righteous. The teacher should make sure no one leaves this lesson feeling superior.

Help students see the danger of ranking sins. We instinctively grade sin so that the ones we struggle with feel minor and the ones we do not struggle with feel major. This protects our self-image but blinds us to our real condition. Paul deliberately mixes the lurid and the ordinary in one list to break that defense.

Be specific and gentle. Invite students to name the respectable sin they most easily tolerate: the cutting remark, the flash of envy, the proud comparison, the quiet contempt, the ingratitude. The goal is not morbid guilt but honest recognition that we belong on this list too, which is exactly Paul's point heading into chapter two.

Tie it to grace. The reason to face our respectable sins is not to despair but to see our need clearly so we stop excusing ourselves and start receiving mercy. The person who thinks they have only small sins feels little need of a Savior. The person who sees themselves honestly on Paul's list is ready for the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of ranking sins to protect our self-image
- Respectable sins (pride, envy, gossip, ingratitude) as truly serious
- The universality of sin, all are implicated in Paul's list
- Honest self-examination as the doorway to receiving grace

Discussion Prompts

- Which respectable sin do you most easily excuse in yourself?
- Why is it dangerous to rank sins so that our own feel acceptable?
- How does seeing yourself honestly on Paul's list prepare you to receive grace?

Question 9

Student Question:

This passage paints a sweeping picture of human sinfulness, including the exchange of natural sexual relations for those contrary to nature (vv. 26–27), set within a long catalog of unrighteousness that ends by noting that people not only do such things but give approval to those who practice them (v. 32). How does Paul describe the seriousness and the scope of human rebellion here, how should the church hold both the truth about sin and genuine compassion for sinners (remembering that the gospel cleanses every kind of sinner, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11), and how does this dark picture prepare us to receive the grace Paul will unfold?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal question of the lesson, and it must be handled with both clarity and compassion. Paul sums up human rebellion in sweeping terms, including the exchange of natural sexual relations for those contrary to nature (vv. 26–27), set within a long list of sins and ending

with the chilling note that people not only practice such things but approve of others who do (v. 32). The teacher should aim to be truthful and tender, neither avoiding the text nor handling it harshly.

First, on the scope. Paul's purpose is not to single out one sin for special condemnation but to show the breadth of human rebellion. The sexual sins he names sit in a list that also includes covetousness, envy, gossip, pride, and disobedience to parents. The teacher should resist any reading that lets the class condemn one group while excusing themselves. Everyone in the room belongs somewhere on this list, which is precisely how Paul disarms the self-righteous in chapter two.

Second, on the truth about the specific verses. Paul does describe same-sex relations here as contrary to nature and dishonorable, in keeping with the consistent teaching of Scripture that God designed sexual intimacy for the marriage of a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6). The teacher should not soften or deny this, but should present it as part of a larger biblical vision of how God made us and what our bodies are for, not as a special category of unforgivable sin. The point is that all of us have, in various ways, exchanged God's design for our own desires.

Third, and crucially, on compassion and hope. The same Paul who wrote these words also wrote, Such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 6:11). The gospel cleanses every kind of sinner. The church must speak the truth about sin while extending the same mercy we ourselves received. The teacher should model a posture that holds both: clear about God's design, and warm toward every person who, like all of us, needs to be washed.

Finally, show how this dark picture sets up the gospel. Paul has now closed off every exit. Jew and Gentile, religious and irreligious, respectable and scandalous, all stand guilty and without excuse. This is not the end of the story but the necessary clearing of the ground. The deeper the diagnosis, the more glorious the cure will appear when Paul reaches Romans 3 and the righteousness of God revealed in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The breadth and seriousness of human rebellion against God
- God's design for sexual intimacy in the marriage of a man and a woman (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4–6)
- Scripture's consistent teaching on sexual ethics, taught truthfully and without harshness
- The danger of singling out one sin while excusing our own
- The gospel cleanses every kind of sinner (1 Corinthians 6:9–11)
- Holding truth and compassion together as the church's calling
- The closing of every exit, preparing the way for grace in Romans 3

Discussion Prompts

- How can the church speak the truth about sin while showing real compassion to sinners?
- Why is it important that Paul places sexual sins in a list that also includes pride, envy, and gossip?
- How does the seriousness of this passage make the grace of Romans 3 shine more brightly?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across this sobering passage. Paul has shown you the wrath of God against sin, the witness of creation, the tragedy of exchanged worship, the downward pull of being given over to sin, and a humanity that approves of evil. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from Romans 1:18-32 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to look back across the whole passage and name how Jesus is forming them through it. Because this is a hard chapter, the teacher's role is to gather the threads in a way that humbles without crushing and points forward to grace.

Recall the movement of the passage: the revelation of God's wrath, the witness of creation, the tragic exchange of worship, the threefold giving over, and a humanity that approves of evil. Each of these is meant to dismantle our self-righteousness and deepen our sense of need. The right response is not despair but honesty.

Encourage students to choose one truth to carry. For some it will be a renewed gratitude that guards the heart; for others, a specific idol to dethrone; for others, a new compassion toward those still trapped in what they were saved from; for others, simply a sober sense of how much they needed the gospel.

Close by lifting their eyes. Paul did not write this chapter to leave anyone in the dark. He wrote it so that the light of Romans 3 to 8 would shine all the brighter. The disciple being formed here is one who has looked honestly at the darkness, including their own, and is therefore ready to receive grace with open hands and to extend it to others.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest conviction of sin as the doorway to grace, not the destination
- Gratitude, humility, and compassion as fruits of facing this passage
- The unity of Romans, diagnosis leading to the cure in Christ
- Spiritual formation through sober self-knowledge

Discussion Prompts

- Which single truth from Romans 1:18-32 most needs to shape your week?

- How has this passage humbled you and increased your gratitude for grace?
- Toward whom might God be calling you to show the same compassion you have received?