

Text: Romans 1:18-32¹

Title: What's So "Good" About the Good News?

Place: First Baptist Church, Olds, AD

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“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men....” Romans 1:18

The question this morning is: **What's So Good About the Good News?**

In the Congregational church of Enfield, Mass, on July 8, 1741, the Rev. Jonathan Edwards, took to the pulpit and plead with the congregation in the following words:

"O sinner! Consider the fearful danger you are in: it is a great furnace of wrath, a wide and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath, that you are held over in the hand of that God, whose wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you, as against many of the damned of hell. You hang by **a slender thread**, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no interest in any Mediator, and **nothing** to lay hold of to save yourself, **nothing** to keep off the flames of wrath, **nothing** of your own, **nothing** that you ever have done, **nothing** that you can do, to induce God to spare you one moment..."

What happened next has become a part of American history -- people responded to the offer of salvation in Christ in droves! As Edwards preached that sermon again and again in churches throughout the New England states, thousands of people responded to his call for people to avoid the wrath of God by coming to faith in Jesus Christ. The course of American history was altered by a revival that has come to be known as "The Great Awakening."

What these people responded to was the Good News that through Jesus Christ they could be saved from the wrath of God that stood against them -- the anger of God that burned against their sin!

What's so good about the Good News? It's that by trusting in Christ we are no longer held by a "slender thread" as Edwards described it but by the strong hand of God and, as Jesus Christ put it, "no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand." (John 10:29) Is the good news more than that? Yes, of course it is, but it is never less than that!

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The Good News that Paul proclaims here is that we have been saved from the judgment and wrath of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Johnny Hart was a Christian cartoonist whose cartoon strips were at one time carried by over 1,100 newspapers world-wide. At Easter and Christmas, Hart did some pretty creative things to present the gospel. He was straight forward without cutting corners, and he told it like it is. One of his most famous strips was this one that appeared on Christmas Day in 1990:

[First panel: Man approaches table loaded with books and carrying the sign, "Gospels." Man asks man behind the table: "What does the 'Gospel' mean? Man behind the table responds: "It means 'Good News.'"]

Second panel: First man asks: "What's good about it?" Second man responds: "Beats the hell out of me."]

[reveal first panel -- then reveal second]

You'll have to excuse Hart's strong use of language, but Hart was trying to communicate with today's audience exactly the same thing that Jonathan Edwards said in 1741-- that unless we turn in faith to Christ and accept the Good News that Jesus died to take our penalty for sin, the only thing that waits for us is hell -- God's judgment against sin.

Last week we learned that the Good News of the Gospel is **at least three things**:

- 1) Its God's Good News that **Jesus Christ defeated death** and rose from the dead. We worship a living Lord Jesus Christ, not a dead religion
- 2) Its the Good News of **God's power to save those who believe in Christ from the penalty and power of sin**. We are freed from the fear of punishment and empowered to live a new life.
- 3) Its the Good News of **God's gift of righteousness** to those who have faith in Christ. We are made right with God through faith in Christ.

The Gospel is Good News precisely because it delivers us from the Bad News – the wrath of God against sin. The wrath of God is a tough subject to deal with today for several reasons.

First of all, this morning I want to deal with some of the **common misconceptions about the wrath of God** and secondly I want to share with you why I believe God is justified in being angry with sin.

Let's begin by dealing with some of the common misconceptions around this subject.

First of all, many people struggle with the idea of the anger of God because they make an understandable but misleading comparison between the anger of God the Father and that of their own human fathers and mothers.

A few years ago I was talking with my barber about the story of Jesus clearing the temple in John chapter 2. (One look at me will give you the clear impression that this conversation must have occurred quite some time ago.) In that passage in John chapter 2, you might remember, Jesus used a whip and turned over the tables of the money changers, driving them out of the temple courts. Their presence there had offended the holiness of the place. Jesus is clearly angry at these men. But my barber, a devout, Bible-believing Christian, couldn't allow himself to believe that Jesus, loving Jesus who would rather die than strike those who crucified him, could become angry. His reason? Because he had grown up in a home where his father had been an unstable, rage-aholic and my friend couldn't reconcile his experience of his father's anger with the character of Jesus.

Maybe you grew up in a home like that and dealing with the anger of our heavenly Father against sin is hard for you to reconcile with your picture of your heavenly Father who loves you.

What we need to understand is that God's wrath against sin is not human anger simply raised to the level of God's all-powerful might. Human anger is always subject to the problem of mixed motives.

As parents we understand that often when we get angry at our children it's because their actions have inconvenienced us, or their questions have worn on our frayed nerves, or their wants have frustrated our wants. That's petty, selfish anger.

God's wrath is not selfish, like our anger so often can be. God's anger is not even strictly emotional. One writer has defined God's wrath as "**the settled response of God's holiness to wickedness and rebellion.**" It is a measured, clearly defined response to specific actions. It is not unpredictable -- it is certain!

Second, some people tend to see wrath as the personification of the "Old Testament" God but then they would say that the God of the New Testament is more correctly seen as a God of love and forgiveness.

The God of the Old Testament, in this view, is the One who turned the cities of Sodom & Gomorra into a salt pit and who regularly punished nation upon nation with wars and plagues. This God would be typified as a warrior.

The New Testament God, on the other hand in this view, is the One who sent His Son to die for sinners. Instead of "toasting" those who rejected Him, He reached

out to them in forbearing and forgiving love, especially through the Cross of Jesus Christ. This God would be typified as a Lamb.

The problem in this view is that it requires God to change something He can't change -- His own unchanging, ever-faithful character. You just can't have an "OT" God and a "NT" God. It also completely misses the New Testament fact that Jesus, the Lamb of God who died for the salvation of sinners, will return one day, not to die on a cross, but to ride on a white horse, as the Book of Revelation pictures him, bringing with him judgment against those who refuse to accept Him as their sin-bearer.

The Book of Revelation in the New Testament describes the events of the end of history. Jesus, the "Lamb," will return to execute God's judgment against sin. This is how the Apostle John describes that Day of Judgment:

“Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful, and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, ‘Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb, for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?’” Revelation 6:15-17

The "wrath of the Lamb" -- the One who died to bear the wrath of God against sin will come one day to bring judgment against all those who refuse to take Him as their Lamb for sin.

Thirdly, many people have difficulty in understanding how to reconcile God's wrath against sin with his love for sinners. It might be helpful to see that God's love is a part of his character -- it flows from Him like water, because **"God is love."** (1 John 4:16)

God's wrath, on the other hand, is not so much a part of his character as it is his response to the presence of sin. God is just and righteous -- God's anger against sin flows from the fact that He is concerned to support what is right and oppose what is wrong. When something that God loves is wronged by something, then his justice, acting together with his love, moves him to respond with punishment and correction to protect what He loves.

Think of it on a human level. Could you call a person loving or just:

- 1) who is not angry about people being blown apart by terrorist bombers in Afghanistan or Iraq?
- 2) or who is not moved to anger by the destruction of life caused by drunk drivers on our highways or in abortion clinics across our country?
- 3) or who is not angered by the actions of child pornographers?

Anger in these situations is an expression of love and justice. God loves His creation and desires justice for His people. Sin stands in the way of His love and denies justice to His people.

C.S. Lewis, the British Christian author, put the truth that we have a God who is loving and yet also capable of executing righteous judgment into terms that even children could understand. In his book, The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe, two girls, Lucy and Susan, are getting ready to meet Aslan the lion, the hero of the story. Aslan's character is clearly based on the person of Jesus Christ. Two talking animals, Mr. & Mrs. Beaver, are getting the children ready for their encounter with Aslan.

"Ooh," says Susan, "I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion." "Safe?" replied Mr. Beaver, "Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you!"

It's naive to think of a God who is loving and good without also realizing that He is holy and just -- that He is just as capable of executing judgment as He is of offering mercy. "He isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you!"

Richard Niebuhr, an American theologian defined this naive Gospel this way. The message heard from some pulpits, he wrote, is that "**A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.**" (Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, p. 193)

No sin -- no wrath!

No wrath -- no cross!

No cross -- no salvation!

No salvation -- NO GOOD NEWS!

God is angry about sin and I want to give you **three good reasons** why He should be.

First, Paul tells that **God's is angry about sin...**

...because of sin's effect upon our relationship with Him. (v.18-25)

The word, "ungodliness" in v. 18, is the key to the whole sin problem -- it's the sin of man against God. Ungodliness is our neglect of or rebellion against His will.

In v. 21 to 23 Paul describes how the rejection of the truth about God has led the human race into the problems that still plague us today. Here is an important spiritual principle: **Wrong ideas about God lead to wrong behaviour in life.**

Paul wrote...

“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. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.” Romans 1:21-23

Although we might not make idol "images" today, idolatry still exists in the twenty-first century - it just takes different forms.

There's **the idolatry of humanism**. We elevate ourselves to the throne of the universe and "I think" rather than "God says" becomes our touchstone of truth. We claim to be "wise" beyond God's wisdom. (v.22)

Even though God left a testimony of His eternal power and divine nature in the world He had created, mankind chooses to suppress and reject this knowledge and to choose their own way. (v.19) We claim to be "wise," to know a better way than God and we dethrone him from his rightful place in our lives.

There's **the idolatry of greed**. In Colossian 3:5 Paul warns us that greed can replace God in our lives with the idol of money. In North America today, I would say, there are as many worshippers of money as there are of God.

There's **the idolatry of pleasure**. Paul tells us that ungodliness, in turn, leads to "unrighteousness" -- the sins of man against man, woman against woman, person against person.

Paul's outline of the descent of the human race into unrighteousness makes for tough reading -- sin is not polite or pretty, it's obscene and gory!

When we rejected God, He "gave us up" (v.24) to the things we desired. C.S. Lewis has referred to this as "the horrible freedom." We wanted our own way -- and God gave it to us.

God "gave us up," Paul said, to sexual "impurity" because we chose to worship "the creature rather than the Creator...." (v.24-25) Paul points to a correspondence between sexual immorality and a refusal to worship God.

Sexual sin has a powerful effect on our relationship with God. Tony Campolo, the famous American Christian speaker and college professor, says that when a young Christian college student comes to him and says, "I just can't believe in Christ anymore, it just doesn't make sense!" his response is not, "What deep intellectual issue are you struggling with?" but rather, "Who are you sleeping with?" You see, because Christianity makes such good intellectual sense, Campolo reasons that the trouble must lie elsewhere. In his experience, young

people who choose sexual impurity also choose to suppress their knowledge of God.

God is angry at sin's effect on our relationship with Him -- sin leads us to reject Him as God. He has a right to be angry!

Secondly, Paul tells us that **God is angry about sin...**

...because of the effect of sin on us. (v.26-28)

Paul says that God gave us up to shameful lusts and in the end, we receive in ourselves "the due penalty" for our sinful choices.

One of the great debates in the Christian world today is over the question of homosexuality. Is homosexual behaviour sin to be confessed and repented of or is it a "viable, alternative lifestyle," acceptable for Christians as well as for others? Should men and women who profess to be homosexual and who practice these behaviours without repentance be given full standing as members and ministers within the church of Jesus Christ? One of the historic churches of Christendom is being torn apart by this issue in these very days.

Whatever theologians and church councils may conclude, the Word of God says -- GOD says -- very clearly: lesbian and gay sexual relations are "dishonourable," "contrary to nature," and "shameless." (Romans 1:26-27)

We need to remember that sexual sin of all kinds, whether homosexual or heterosexual, brings a "due penalty" into our bodies. The growing number of STD's of all kinds is directly related to the sexual promiscuity that the Word of God condemns as sin. On top of the STD's are the emotional scars caused by sexual relationships which were not in agreement with God's direction for how we are to express our God-given sexuality -- within monogamous, heterosexual relationships.

Somehow we've convinced ourselves that sin won't hurt us. It's like the woman who kept a racoon as a pet. Racoons go through a glandular change at about 24 months. After that they often attack their owners and a 30 lb. racoon has the strength of a 100 lb. dog.

Although Julie had been warned about the dangers, she replied, "It will be different for me. Bandit won't hurt me. He just wouldn't." 3 months later, Julie underwent plastic surgery for lacerations sustained when "dear Bandit" ripped through her face for no apparent reason.

God is angry about sin because of what sin does to us!

Thirdly, **God is angry about sin...**

...because of its effect on our relationships with others (v.29-32).

In v.28 Paul tells us that God gave us over to "a debased mind" that leads us to behave with cruelty toward others.

The word translated as "debased" literally means "un-right" -- i.e. deeply twisted!

Any daily newspaper can offer plenty of evidence of human twistedness being played out against others.

All the sins that Paul lists in v.29-31 are interpersonal. Among them are:

v.29 "covetousness" - wanting more and more, not because you need it, but simply because you want it. Greed always comes at somebody else's expense.

v.29 "envy" -- wanting what somebody else has, because they have it, and you want it.

v.30 "inventors of evil" -- to cover all the new ways we create to be cruel to others.

A waitress in McDonalds in England a few years ago combined "greed" and "envy" in an "inventive" way. She made a bomb-hoax call to a nearby Burger King during the annual Christmas IRA bombing campaign. A court was told that senior staff at the local McDonalds had encouraged the call in hopes of getting it's rival's customers, breaking sales records and earning a bonus.

In v. 29 Paul lists "murder." A survey was taken which indicated that British men and women were willing to combine this sin with "greed" quite readily. 11% of British men and 3% of British women were willing to commit murder to become millionaires if they could be assured that they wouldn't be caught. The survey also indicated that 50% of the population would cheat on their income taxes if they wouldn't be caught. The survey concluded that "an astonishing proportion of Britons are prepared to put morality to one side if they think it worth their while."

And the list goes on. Just think of the 'inventive ways' to combine some of the following: gossip, slander, arrogance, boastfulness, disobedience to parents, and many more!

God is angry about sin because of what it leads us to do against others!

We all stand together under God's righteous judgement. Without the Cross of Jesus Christ standing between us and the wrath of God, there isn't a human being who would stand a hope!

“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.” Romans 2:1

A Holocaust survivor demonstrated this truth most eloquently. Yehiel Dinur was a witness during the trial of Adolf Eichmann, one of the architects of Hitler's campaign against the Jews. Dinur entered the courtroom and stared at the man behind the bulletproof glass -- the man who had presided over the slaughter of millions. The court was hushed as a victim confronted a butcher of his people.

Suddenly Dinur began to sob and collapsed to the floor. But not out of anger or bitterness or fear. As he explained later in a TV interview, what struck him was a terrifying realization. "I was afraid of myself," Dinur explained. "I saw that I am capable to do this... Exactly like he. Eichmann," he concluded, "is in all of us."

Until we realize that WE, the I, am "Eichmann" and that God's wrath against my sin is just and right, we can never sing with John Newton:

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a WRETCH like me,
I once was lost -- not just wandering and lonely, but without a hope of heaven!
But now am found -- God's grace and mercy found me at the Cross
Was blind -- had turned my back on God and was going my own way
But now I see. -- God's mercy opened my eyes to see Jesus' love for me!

What's so good about the Good News? It takes away the wrath of God that stands against us as condemned and guilty sinners.

How about you?

As Edwards said:

"O sinner... you have...

**NOTHING to lay hold of to save yourself,
NOTHING to keep off the flames of wrath,
NOTHING of your own,
NOTHING that you ever have done,
NOTHING that you can do..."**

There is a great old Christian hymn that asks and answers a simple question:

"What can wash away my sin?" The answer given, say it with me:

Nothing but the blood of Jesus!

"What can make me whole again?" Say it with me:

Nothing but the blood of Jesus!

- The Lord's Table
- Songs of Communion
Nothing But the Blood (#337)
And Can It Be? (#347)
- Benediction