Pastor David M. Choi

What Sin Does: Confuses

**Scripture Reading:** Romans 1:18-25

**Introduction:**

During this Lenten season, we’ve been looking at the topic of sin for our inward nights. Specifically, we’ve been looking at what sin *does*. For the first night, we looked at how sin works to enslave us; for the second night, we considered the destructive nature of sin; and now we’ve reached the third installment of our series, namely, how sin confuses us.

Before I go any further, though, I want to say a quick word about why we’ve been giving so much time and attention to sin, as I’m sure it hasn’t brought you much comfort, coming to church every week, hearing me preach on how sinful, messed up, broken, and ugly you really are. I mean, by this point, some of you may have begun to wonder, “Why can’t Pastor David preach a more encouraging message to us? Why does he always talk about sin?” To that, here is my short reply. First of all, and very simply, the gospel of Jesus Christ mandates me to do so. Second, that’s the point of Lent. Lent is a season of penitence, where we are called to do the deep, painful work of introspection. Christ died for us on Good Friday, and He rose again for us on Easter Sunday. And so, we should not receive the Lord’s great gift and costly sacrifice in an unworthy, unreflective manner. Third, related to these prior points, we want to *love knowing our sin* – as well as knowing the *depth* of our sin – precisely because, in doing so, it leads us to cherish the gospel more deeply. All of you have heard at some point in your lives that you are a sinner. But less of you have thought about what that actually means. The bible tells us, however, that knowing it as a general truth is not enough. For you can only cherish the gospel and experience the infinite magnitude of God’s love by first excavating and acknowledging the *full weight* of your sin.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Now that that’s been made clear, tonight we’re looking at Romans 1:18-25, to see how sin works to confuse us. However, Paul does not speak of confusion as something purely intellectual, though that’s definitely a part of it. But more than that, he’s talking about an all-consuming, existential confusion, which occurs at the level of our souls, fundamentally distorting the way we live in and relate to the world around us. It’s a confusion born by our unwillingness to love God above all else. We’ll spend some time unpacking what Paul means by this, in order to then hear how the gospel invites us to respond.

**God’s Wrath Being Poured Out:**

Paul begins this passage by talking about God’s wrath. The reason he does so is because he wants us to see our state of corruption, the state into which Christ enters our lives. But we need to go back a bit and read the preceding verses (i.e. vv.16-17), because these verses are pivotal for making sense of the passage before us. Here Paul says that God’s righteousness is revealed in and through the gospel. *Therefore*, the mentioning of humanity’s ungodliness and unrighteousness in v.18 is meant to highlight the nature of *God’s* righteousness, as it is now being made known through God’s terrible wrath. Notice, God’s judgment and wrath, according to the Apostle, are already being worked out among us – regardless of whether we realize it or not – *because* He is holy and righteous, because it is consistent with His character.[[2]](#footnote-2) Paul will speak more to this later on. But prior to that, Paul says we first have to understand *why* that is - which he introduces at the end of v.18.

God’s wrath is being poured out on us because we have *suppressed the truth*. “Hold on a second. How have I suppressed God’s truth? What does that even mean?” Well, in v.19, Paul tells us that God has made Himself and His power known to us through the works of His creation.[[3]](#footnote-3) This is what Jonathan Edwards meant by saying in created things we can catch glimpses of divine shadows; or, Karl Barth when he said we can see “God’s footprint” in the whole of creation.[[4]](#footnote-4) To give a clearer illustration of how this might happen, a friend once shared with me a story about an interaction she had with one of her professors at Yale. My friend is doing her PhD in microbiology, and one day she and her advisor were examining a microorganism under a powerful microscope. They spent concentrated amounts of time observing its behavior, its movement, and its structure. Afterwards, her professor, who is not a Christian, told her, “You see, when I look at something like this, it makes me want to believe in a God so badly.” In other words, the professor was saying that when there is this much beauty and order within creation it is highly tempting to believe that only a good, powerful God could have created it. Undoubtedly, this professor caught glimpses of divinity. Unfortunately, nowadays unless one is a microbiologist one rarely experiences God’s power in this sort of way because technology and social media consume us almost entirely.

But God has also revealed Himself to us through the gospel! Which is presumably and hopefully the reason why we’re all here and why we gravitate towards the church every week. In Christ, God has demonstrated His mighty love for us, and through His church God has communicated supernatural grace and wisdom. Nonetheless, so many of us remain unaffected and unchanged by all of it. That is, we come to church, sing praise songs, and hear His message. But despite all of these things, when we return to our normal lives, we go on living the way we’ve been living. Not because of any failure on my part, or your leaders, or this church, but because you, for some reason, continue to deny the work of God’s Spirit! You see? In all of these ways, whether it be through your inattentiveness to divine things within creation, or your outright unwillingness to be convicted by the Spirit, you suppress the truth.

Paul, therefore, says we are without excuse. By this, he means that God rightly holds us accountable for our sin, since He has given us all that we need in order to have eternal life and a relationship with Him. To clarify, I wouldn’t be able to hold Teacher Kitty accountable for not showing up to church on time at 7:00pm, *unless* I told her I had actually changed the time to 7:00pm from what is our normal time. If I did do that, that would be pretty messed up. However, if I had explicitly told her that I did change the time, then I would be able to hold her accountable to that, since she was given knowledge of it. Similarly, if God had not shown us the way, we would have a legitimate excuse, but now that He has shown us the way He has stripped away our entire armor of excuses. Know this: because you’re here right now - sitting in this church, with a bible in your lap, listening to this message – you especially are without an excuse.

**Futile in Thinking:**

Of course, we all know that despite God’s invitation and warning, human beings have not obeyed. And in the following sections, Paul spells out for us the consequences of that decision. *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*. First, what’s being said here is that merely knowing things *about* God is not enough *if* that knowledge does not produce in you a radical transformation in the way you relate to Him. That is, the knowledge of God, of what He has done for you in Christ, ought to produce in you certain affections that make gratitude and honor your primary response towards Him. Sadly, there are many people in this world who know God, but it has done nothing for them. And for these kinds of people, God says they have become futile in their thinking, that is, their thoughts have become vain, useless, or pointless, and thereby their foolish hearts darkened. Why? Because, apart from Christ, whatever thoughts and feelings we may have about the world, others, and even God, such thoughts and feelings will always be underdeveloped at best or horrendously twisted by sin at worst.[[5]](#footnote-5) Thus, if we truly want to know who we are and who God is we have to do so in the context of a *loving* relationship with Him. In other words, only by having a relationship with God can we make sense of ourselves rightly, and only by having a relationship with God can we truly know how we are meant to live.

This is why living on terms that have been defined for us by God is anything but oppressive. Rather, it’s life-giving because those terms allow us to live into the freedom of being what God has created us to be. However, Paul says when we reject a relationship with God, what we’re really doing is we’re choosing to live on our own terms, because we think *we* know what’s best for us. We think we’re wiser than God, we think we’re smarter than God: “Who is God to tell *me* how to live? Only I get to shape my life’s meaning and destiny!” To this, Paul says, “Claiming to be wise, they became fools…” Because, in essence, what we’re really doing is we’re calling falsehood ‘truth’ and truth ‘falsehood’. According to a recent survey on the level of religious engagement within each state, the state of Connecticut ranks within the bottom five.[[6]](#footnote-6) Connecticut is one of the most secular states within the country. But is it any surprise given that, by worldly standards, it houses one of the most coveted universities anywhere in the world? I mean, is it any surprise that within such a university most students and professors would deem God as unnecessary because they have convinced themselves by way of their academic achievements that they are somehow wiser than God? Is it any surprise given that it has convinced the world, including many of us, that ‘real’ wisdom is the one it offers, rather than the one God offers to us in Christ? Thus, as inhabitants of Connecticut specifically, and the northeast generally, we especially need to be wary of thinking ourselves as wise, lest we become fools.

When you think of yourself as wiser than God, Paul says surely you will think you are living according to truth, but make no mistake you’re as confused as they come because you have exchanged God’s glory for creaturely images; that is, you have exchanged God’s truth for a lie.

**Living in Confusion:**

Paul gives us a concrete list of what life looks like when lived in a state of sinful confusion. In vv.26-27, he talks about how men and women have given up natural relations for relations that are unnatural. On this point, I want to be very careful and watch what I say, because this is a really complicated issue, and there’s a lot we can say about this topic, but alas we just don’t have the time for it. However, Paul at the very least seems to indicate that God created human beings to have a certain kind of sexual relationship, but they have gone against what God had originally intended. He says they were “shameless” in their acts, by which he means they have deemed for themselves what would be befitting expressions of love and sexuality.

However, it’s not just at the level of our sexuality where we’ve become confused by sin. It encompasses our *entire* being, for the confusion of sin, according to Paul, produces in us unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness, haughtiness, boastfulness, evil inventions, disobedience to parents, foolishness, faithlessness, heartlessness, and ruthlessness. That’s quite a lengthy list! And if you fall into one or more of these things, Paul is saying you are these things because you are confused! Because you choose to live on terms that have not been defined by God! All these things are the natural, catastrophic consequences of life lived outside the context of truth, which is a loving relationship with God. Sin confounds our perception of truth, and Paul is showing us that these things are its real life consequences.

**Returning to God’s Wrath:**

The brokenness of our lives betrays the reality that we have indeed suppressed God’s truth. And in v.24, Paul now returns to where he began in v.18. He explains that God’s wrath is when God gives us up to the impurities of our hearts. Or, to put it more simply, the wrath of God is when God gives us exactly what we want: “If you think yourself wise, and want to live according to the standards of your own judgment, then go for it.” God’s wrath is when God says to you, “Thy will be done.” And this ought to terrify you greatly, as it terrifies me greatly.

Thus, the moral evils and consequences that come from living life apart from God, which we’ve seen in vv.26-32, are not only the results of sin, but they are also the tools of God’s wrath and judgment. How exactly you might ask? Insofar as we continue to exchange God’s truth for a lie, our lives will continue to increase in vanity, suffering, and misery. This is God’s wrath. Insofar as we continue to live outside of Christ, we will tear each other apart, through oppression, coercion, manipulation, and violence. This, too, is God’s wrath. It’s happening right now in front of us. You need look no further than yourself, your family, or a newspaper.

So, what hope is there for us? What should our response to God’s wrath be? First, we should remember that God’s wrath is always tethered to God’s mercy: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.”[[7]](#footnote-7) So, God’s wrath is never strictly punitive, but it’s meant to drive you towards His mercy, love, and kindness. By experiencing His wrath, through all of your life’s miseries, God is patiently pointing you towards Himself in Christ, who has now made a way for you to know God and to live life abundantly. Later, in Romans 2:4, Paul says, “Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?” Thus, Christ is the point of God’s wrath, because Christ is your hope. Christ came to show us what a life in obedience to God looks like, that is, a life utterly free from sin’s confusion and distortion of identity and reality. And when we place our trust in Christ, we are met with God’s grace to walk in truth and light.

However, God will not force Himself on anyone who does not truly desire Him. God’s wrath will remain God’s wrath for those who continue to live life in faithlessness and disobedience. For those who do not want Him, for those who continue to treat Him as a means to some other ends, for those who refuse to love God for who He is, and not for what He can give you, the text tells us that He will give such people over to all their hearts desires. In the end, everyone will get what they want: life with God, or hell on earth unto eternity. So, the warning and encouragement are one and the same: discover God’s mercy *in* God’s wrath, cling to the hope of Christ, and, in being changed by this unimaginable hope, walk according to God’s truth so that you would experience the fullness of life. Sin confuses the meaning of life. But God has made it clearly known to us through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. We can be sure of this, for God is not a God of confusion, but a God of peace.[[8]](#footnote-8)

1. See 1 Corinthians 15:3: “Now I would remind you, brothers [and sisters], of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – *unless you believed in vain.*” Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Piper notes, “[God’s wrath] is happening now, not just in the future. There is a day of wrath coming. But in advance of that final outpouring of wrath, God’s wrath is also present. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Psalm 19:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1959), 20. “If we look past Him, we must not be surprised if we fail to find God and experience errors and disillusionments, if the world seems dark to us.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Michael Lipka and Benjamin Wormald, “How religious is your state?,” *Pew Research Center*, February 29, 2016, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/29/how-religious-is-your-state/?state=alabama. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Exodus 34:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 1 Corinthians 14:33 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)