

The Courage to Confess

Richard C. Leonard, Ph.D.

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Romans 1:16—2:11 NIV

I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.

You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things. Now we know that God’s judgment against those who do such things is based on truth. So when you, a mere man, pass judgment on them and yet do the same things, do you think you will escape God’s judgment? Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance?

But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God “will give to each person according to what he has done.” To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. For God does not show favoritism.

President Calvin Coolidge, the laconic native Vermonter, attended a church service one Sunday. When he returned to the White House someone asked him, “What did the minister preach about?”

“Sin,” was Coolidge’s reply.

“And what did he say about it?” the person asked.

“He said he was agin’ it.”

Betty has read to us a very long passage from the first two chapters of Paul’s Letter to the Romans. I wanted her to read all of it, because the very length of the passage drives home an important point: Like Coolidge’s preacher, God is “agin’ sin.” He’s greatly concerned that we *recognize* what sin is,

acknowledge it in ourselves and in the culture in which we live, *turn away* from it, and *accept his remedy* for it.

In our passage from Romans, Paul begins by saying, “I am not ashamed of the gospel.” The gospel, or *euangelion*, is the “good news” about what God has done for us in his Son Jesus. But the *good news* about God begins as the *bad news* about us: left to our own devices we always mess up our lives because we don’t pay attention to how God has set up the universe and ordered his human family. In other words, we’re *sinners*. If we weren’t sinners, we wouldn’t need a Savior from sin.

Paul continues, in our passage, with a long description of the *bad news*. He gives us a catalog of sinful behaviors that reads like the six o’clock news. Or, perhaps, what might be the six o’clock news except that our culture has become so accustomed to such behavior that it’s hardly news any more. Think of some of the behavior he mentions: greed, depravity, murder, slander, deceit, arrogance, disrespect for parents, faithlessness, ruthlessness — and just general evil and wickedness. People are so bent on denying God any role in managing their lives, Paul says, that they even “invent ways of doing evil” that have never been tried before.

And what’s the first kind of behavior Paul describes, as if to say that it’s the most telling manifestation of sin? “God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another” (Romans 1:24). Specifically, Paul’s reference is to homosexuality between both men and women. Now, why is that such a big deal to the Lord? Why is that the first kind of sinful behavior he mentions?

Look at what Paul has just said: “For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles” (Romans 1:21-23). When people ignore God’s glory and begin to worship mankind, and his ideas — and, by the way, get into occult religions and astrology and earth-worship, which is where the birds and animals and reptiles come into the picture — then a basic understanding of *who people really are* has been lost.

For the Scriptural witness is that mankind has been created in the image of God, to be his representative in the management of this earth. And the Bible is very clear that that image, or picture, of God is *heterosexual*. “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). It’s man and woman *together* who witness to God’s dominion over all things. The easiest way to deny that God is our Creator, or that we’re accountable to him, is to compromise that picture of God by claiming he made our bodies *the wrong way*, for heterosexual behavior. The quickest way to say that we’re not responsible to a Creator, after all, is to engage in behavior that doesn’t match the way he obviously made us *in his image*.

But *all* sin, not just homosexuality, flows from the refusal to acknowledge God. Homosexual behavior doesn’t exhaust the catalog of depravity. If we’re looking for ways to disobey the Lord, there’s plenty of *choice*, as Paul’s catalog of sins and a flip through your TV channels will remind you. Even the idea of *choice* can harbor sinful intent, for it expresses a rebellion against having to live and do things in a certain way. The Bible recognizes that the desire to step outside of God’s boundaries is inherent in the heart of man. Recall those awful verses in Genesis, chapter 6: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Genesis 6:5-6). Recall Jeremiah’s warning: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt; who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). Recall Paul’s crushing assessment in Romans 3:23: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” To be in rebellion against God is just kind of built into the current human condition — as the Bible’s story of the Garden of Eden makes clear.

But our culture has lost its biblical perspective, and with it any real consciousness of sin. To acknowledge our disobedience, we also have to acknowledge that there’s Someone we’re disobeying. Our awareness of sin depends on our awareness of God. Because our culture seems determined to

blind itself to the glory of God, most people don't recognize sin when they see it. So people resent it when Christians try to raise up a biblical standard for evaluating human conduct. Yes, our culture has its set of "no-no's," but the main "no-no" is to have some "no-no's." In many cases, the most *wrong* thing you can do is to suggest that someone else's behavior is *wrong*. If I were preaching this sermon in Canada, for example, I could be arrested tonight because of what I've mentioned about homosexuality. Thank God that in the U.S. we have a President who's willing to take a stand for common sense, and for the recognition that certain things, like unrestricted abortion or gay marriage, are just plain stupid and wrong.

You and I may well be aware of sin in our own hearts. If we know the Lord, we know that he has spoken through inspired leaders to explain to us what pleases him and what offends him. We recognize that sin is subtle. It doesn't have to manifest itself in depraved or violent or grasping behavior. It can manifest itself in the simple refusal to let Christ have all of our hearts. It can show up in complacent self-centeredness that's content to rock along in a "business-as-usual" sort of religion that never reaches a high level of excitement or commitment. It can rear its ugly head in a lack of concern for the needs, feelings or spiritual welfare of other people. We have to repent of that sin and ask the Lord to forgive us and fill us with the power to overcome it. It takes *courage* to confess this sin, because confession challenges our image of ourselves as pretty good people, after all. Confession is an admission that we *don't* have it all together, that we *do* have faults for all our "sinner's prayers," and Sunday school pins, and gold stars, and names written on the attendance pads. Confessing sin is risky; are we brave enough to do it?

So we need to confess our own sin, but we also have to confess sin for others. So many people we know, in our world and nation and local community, don't recognize how far they've fallen into sin. Perhaps members of our family, our own loved ones, don't see it yet. We have to confess to the Lord on their behalf. That idea goes against our individualism; isn't each person responsible for himself? Well, biblically, yes and no. The prophet Isaiah had a vision of the Lord's majesty, and he cried out, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:5). Isaiah understood that he was a member of a sinful *community*. Even if he personally had a heart for God, he still participated in the sin of the culture to which he belonged, and he had to confess in behalf of all his people.

It takes courage to confess for others, for they won't understand what we're doing or why it's necessary. They'll think we're judging them, when what we're really doing is trying to spare them the judgment that's sure to come if they fail to confess for themselves and turn to the Lord. In our lesson from Romans, Paul says that "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Romans 1:18). The wrath of God, in the Bible, isn't always expressed in bolts of lightning from heaven, or the earth opening up to swallow the offender. The wrath of God, as Paul makes clear, is simply the outworking of the *inevitable consequence* of our own sinful actions. God doesn't have to "zap" us to enact his judgment upon our sin. All he has to do is *leave us alone*. All he has to do is to turn his back. As Paul puts it, "Therefore God gave them up" (Romans 1:24) — and let them do whatever they wanted to do. When people are determined to pursue their own way without the Lord, they will neither recognize their own sin nor confess it to God. Those who know the Lord will have to confess it for them. It takes courage to do that.

So, what's the answer to the problem of sin? How can we, or anyone else, be released from the wrath of God — the consequence of our determination to go our own way without him? Our passage from Paul's Epistle to the Romans contains a hint of the answer in his very description of the problem. Look at Romans 1:21 again: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God *nor gave thanks to him*, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." In the Bible, *confession* has two meanings. One meaning, the one we've been talking about up to now, is to *confess our sin*, to acknowledge the ways in which we have fallen short of God's standard for us. The other meaning of confession is found in this expression, "give thanks." In Scripture, "giving thanks" isn't just

voicing our gratitude to the Lord for his blessings. It really means *confessing the Lord* as our God and Savior. To “give thanks” is to acknowledge that God is our authority. It’s to take the “pledge of allegiance” to the Lord. To “give thanks” is to *confess our faith* in him and what he has done for us in Christ. It’s to make the same confession as the apostle Thomas, when he met the risen Jesus: “My Lord and my God!”

It takes courage, also, to make this kind of confession. It goes against the grain of our culture to admit that there’s a higher authority in life than each person’s own self-centered motivations. Everything in our environment screams at us, “Have it *your way*. *You* have rights. It’s *your* life. Be all *you* can be. *You’re* No. 1.” Confessing the Lord as our authority clashes with that paradigm. It’s an act of courage to stand up and “give thanks,” to confess the Lord as our only Savior, to say, “I’m not my own to do with as I see fit. I belong to another; I’ve been bought with a price.”

And that price isn’t even something *we* paid — so far are we from having any merit or worth to claim for ourselves. The price that redeems us from sin had to be paid by Another. “But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). On the cross, Jesus made the ultimate confession of sin — not his sin, but the sin of all who belong to him — and he paid the price in that agonizing death. God turned his back, gave his Son over to death, and his wrath fell upon the only One who could bear it for all humanity.

Lent, which begins today, is a sober season. It’s a season of repentance and acknowledgement of sin. Therefore it has to be a season of courage — the courage to confess our own shortcomings and those of the community we live in, and the courage to confess Christ as God’s loving provision for us. Yes, Lent is a sober time, but it’s also a time of hope, for we know where it leads: to the celebration of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. We know that at the end of these forty days we will witness God’s vindication of the One who paid that awful price for us. Even the very name *Lent* contains that promise, for it comes from an old English expression for the *lengthening* of days in springtime. There’s a springtime ahead for all who put their trust in God’s answer to our deepest need. And that hope gives each of us the courage to confess.

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