

Homiletics Analysis: Romans 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content

Romans 1 opens Paul's most systematic exposition of the gospel, functioning as both introduction and argument. The chapter divides into three movements. First, Paul's prologue (vv. 1–17) establishes his apostolic identity, his debt to all peoples, and his eagerness to preach in Rome — culminating in the thesis statement of the entire letter: the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, because in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith (vv. 16–17). Second, Paul pivots without pause into his indictment of Gentile humanity (vv. 18–32): the wrath of God is being revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of those who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. The argument is precise — humanity possesses sufficient knowledge of God through creation (general revelation) to render them without excuse, yet they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images of created things. God's response is a threefold judicial abandonment: He gave them over to impurity (v. 24), to dishonorable passions (v. 26), and to a debased mind (v. 28). The chapter closes with an indictment catalogue listing the fruit of this abandonment and noting that those who practice such things not only do them but give approval to others who do them.

This Text — Content (Broader Unit Note)

Romans 1 is the opening chapter of an argument that runs through Romans 3:20, establishing that all humanity — Gentile and Jew alike — stands under the wrath of God and without righteousness before Him. This broader unit (Romans 1–3) provides the theological foundation for the gospel announcement in Romans 3:21–26 and the doctrine of justification that follows. The analyst and preacher should be aware that Romans 1:18–32 is the first movement of a prosecutorial argument that Paul himself will overturn in 3:23 (“for all have sinned”) — meaning the Gentile indictment of chapter 1 is not ultimately about Gentiles. It is about everyone, including the self-righteous Jewish interlocutor who will nod along in agreement with 1:18–32 and be caught by 2:1. However, Romans 1 makes its own complete claim within this broader movement, and the chapter is fully analyzable on its own terms.

This Text — Intent

God's intent through Romans 1 is to dismantle every ground of human self-sufficiency before the gospel is announced. The chapter is designed to do two things simultaneously: to establish the *glory* of the gospel (it is the power of God for salvation; in it the righteousness of God is revealed) and to establish the *necessity* of the gospel (humanity is not morally neutral — it is actively suppressing known truth, exchanging God for idols, and

receiving the judicial consequence of that exchange). The reader is meant to arrive at the end of this chapter with no remaining illusion about human innocence before God — Gentile or otherwise — and with a heightened sense of what is at stake in the gospel Paul is about to fully unfold. The intent is not to produce despair but to make the gospel *necessary*, not merely *attractive*.

Subject Sentence: The gospel alone answers the universal human condition of suppressed truth and divine wrath.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through Romans 1 that every human being stands without excuse before Him — having received enough light to know God and having deliberately turned from that light — so that the gospel of the righteousness of God revealed in Christ is not an optional upgrade but the only possible rescue from a wrath that is already being revealed.

Interpretive Evaluation

The Righteousness of God (vv. 16–17)

The phrase *dikaiosynē theou* (“righteousness of God”) in verse 17 is among the most contested in Pauline studies. Three primary readings require evaluation.

The *Lutheran/traditional Reformation* reading (Luther, Melancthon, followed by much of Protestant orthodoxy) takes the phrase as a *gift* — the righteousness God declares over the believer, imputed by grace through faith. On this reading, “the righteousness of God is revealed” means God’s act of justifying the ungodly is made known in the gospel. This reading is supported by the strong parallel in Romans 3:21–22 and 10:3, where the righteousness of God is contrasted with human attempts at self-justification, and by the echo of Habakkuk 2:4 (“the righteous shall live by faith”), which places the emphasis on the reception of life through faith rather than on the demonstration of God’s own character.

The *New Perspective on Paul* (Sanders, Dunn, Wright) reads *dikaiosynē theou* primarily as God’s covenant faithfulness — His reliability to fulfill His promises to Israel. On this reading, the righteousness of God is not primarily forensic gift but divine attribute displayed in covenant action. This reading correctly recovers the Jewish covenantal background Paul is drawing on and rightly notes that “righteousness” in the Hebrew prophetic tradition often carries the meaning of God’s saving faithfulness (Isaiah 46:13; 51:5–8; 56:1). **Acknowledge:** This reading helpfully enriches the understanding of Paul’s canonical background and should not be entirely dismissed — there is a covenantal dimension to “the righteousness of God.” **Qualify:** However, to reduce the phrase exclusively to covenant faithfulness reads past the forensic argument Paul is building

toward in chapters 3–5. By 3:21–26, Paul’s concern is precisely the *declaration* of righteousness over sinners — a forensic category that the covenant-faithfulness reading undersells. The Reformed reading holds both dimensions but lets the forensic declaration govern, as the immediate argument of the letter requires.

The *Eastern Orthodox* tradition tends to read “righteousness of God” in a more participatory or transformative key — the divine life communicated to human beings through union with Christ — and gives less weight to the forensic/imputation category.

Qualify: This reading captures something true about the ultimate telos of salvation (participation in the divine nature, per 2 Peter 1:4) but misconstrues Paul’s immediate argument, which is prosecutorial and legal in structure. The forensic reading is required to make sense of the guilt-wrath-justification argument that follows in chapters 1–5.

The Reformed verdict: The righteousness of God in verse 17 is primarily the righteousness God declares over the believing sinner — a forensic gift, received by faith, rooted in God’s covenant faithfulness and fulfilled in Christ. The imputation categories of the later Reformation exposition correctly identify the load-bearing structure of Paul’s argument even if they do not exhaust the phrase’s richness.

God’s “Giving Over” (vv. 24, 26, 28)

The threefold *paredōken* (“gave them over”) has been interpreted variously. Some read these as permissive — God simply removed restraint and allowed human sin to take its natural course. Others read them as punitive and judicial — God’s active, judicial act of abandonment in response to prior sin. The passive/active distinction matters for understanding the nature of divine wrath.

The text itself weighs toward the *active judicial* reading. The verb is used three times in precise, parallel, escalating structure — a rhetorical pattern that signals intentionality. The wrath being “revealed” (v. 18) is the same revelation structure as the righteousness being “revealed” (v. 17) — both are divine acts, not merely natural processes. Additionally, Paul’s framing in verses 24–32 explicitly grounds each “giving over” in the prior idolatrous exchange: *because they exchanged God’s glory, God gave them over*. This is cause-and-effect judicial reasoning, not mere permissiveness.

The Reformed verdict: The “giving over” is God’s active judicial response — not mere permission but a sentence. This understanding is essential for the exposition because it establishes that the human condition under sin is not merely degradation but *judgment already in process*. The gospel’s urgency flows directly from this.

Romans 1:26–27 and Sexual Ethics

The passage's reference to "dishonorable passions" and same-sex relations (vv. 26–27) is contested in contemporary culture and in revisionist readings of Paul. Revisionist interpreters (Boswell, Martin, Brownson) argue Paul is condemning only exploitative forms of same-sex behavior (pederasty, prostitution) or excess passion, not committed same-sex relationships. **Refute:** The text does not support this restriction. Paul's language is categorical — "women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature" and "men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another." The natural/unnatural distinction (*physikos/para physin*) operates at the level of created design, not behavioral expression, and the argument is grounded in creation order, parallel to the idol-substitution in verses 22–23. The revisionist reading requires importing a distinction Paul does not make and ignoring the creation-order grounding Paul explicitly invokes. Paul's argument is that same-sex relations, as such, are an instance of the broader pattern of exchanging created order for a substitute — and this exchange, like all idolatrous exchanges, bears judicial consequences. The preacher should handle this with pastoral care but exegetical clarity — the text does not permit the revisionist restriction.

Key Canonical Support

- **Genesis 1–3** — The creation order Paul appeals to in vv. 19–23 is grounded here: God's eternal power and divine nature are visible in His creation; humanity is made as image-bearers who know God and are accountable to Him. The fall introduces the pattern of exchange Paul diagnoses in Romans 1.
 - **Psalms 19:1–6** — "The heavens declare the glory of God" — the most direct Old Testament parallel to Paul's general revelation argument in vv. 19–20; creation speaks, humanity hears, and the speech is sufficient for accountability.
 - **Isaiah 44:9–20** — The prophetic indictment of idolatry as moral and cognitive self-destruction ("he feeds on ashes; a deluded heart has led him astray") — the Old Testament counterpart to Paul's "they became futile in their thinking and their foolish hearts were darkened" (v. 21).
 - **Habakkuk 2:4** — "The righteous shall live by faith" — the text Paul quotes in v. 17 as the scriptural ground of the gospel's righteousness; the prophetic voice already announced the principle of faith-based righteousness in the Old Testament, demonstrating the gospel is not a novelty but the fulfillment of the covenant.
 - **Romans 3:21–26** — The redemptive answer to the indictment of 1:18–32; the righteousness of God now fully revealed in the propitiation of Christ, for all who believe. The wrath revealed in 1:18 is answered by the propitiation declared in 3:25 — the two halves of the gospel announcement requiring each other.
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Aim: To confront both the reader’s residual self-sufficiency and any domesticated understanding of the gospel — and to replace both with a clear-eyed recognition that the wrath being revealed is real, the human condition is without excuse, and the gospel of Christ’s righteousness is therefore not optional but the only ground on which any person can stand before God.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Paul identifies himself: servant of Christ Jesus, called as apostle, set apart for the gospel	Three self-descriptions, each more specific; “servant” (<i>doulos</i>) echoes OT prophetic commissioning
2–4	The gospel defined: promised beforehand in the prophets, concerning the Son, descended from David, declared Son of God in power by resurrection	Gospel is covenantal, historical, and Christological; “declared” (<i>horizō</i>) = appointed/designated, not adopted
5–6	Paul’s apostolic mission: grace and apostleship for the obedience of faith among all the nations, including the Romans	“Obedience of faith” — faith that manifests as obedience; Rome included in Paul’s Gentile mandate
7	Greeting: to all in Rome who are loved by God and called as saints — grace and peace	Standard epistolary greeting; “loved by God” grounds identity before any imperative
8–12	Thanksgiving and desire: Paul thanks God for their faith, prays for them unceasingly, desires to visit them for mutual encouragement	Genuine apostolic affection; Paul’s desire is <i>mutual</i> strengthening, not one-directional
13–15	Paul’s thwarted plans and sense of obligation: eager to preach in Rome, indebted to all peoples	“I am a debtor” — missionary urgency rooted in apostolic commission, not personal achievement
16	Thesis: Paul is not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to	Pivotal verse; “not ashamed” implies the gospel’s apparent

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
17	everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek The righteousness of God is revealed in the gospel, from faith to faith; “The righteous shall live by faith” (Hab. 2:4)	foolishness/weakness (cf. 1 Cor. 1:18–25); “power of God” — not human rhetoric <i>dikaiosynē theou</i> — forensic gift received by faith; Habakkuk citation grounds the gospel in prophetic promise
18	The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of those who suppress the truth	Present tense: wrath is currently active; “suppress” (<i>katechō</i>) — active, deliberate restraint of known truth
19–20	General revelation: what can be known about God has been made plain; His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly perceived through creation	Sufficient knowledge for accountability, not sufficient for salvation; “without excuse” is the conclusion
21–23	The exchange: they knew God but did not honor or thank Him; became futile in thinking; darkened hearts; claimed wisdom, became fools; exchanged God’s glory for images	Three-stage descent: cognitive (futility), affective (darkened hearts), volitional (exchange); idolatry as deliberate substitution
24–25	First “gave them over”: to impurity, to dishonoring their own bodies; because they exchanged truth for the lie, worshiping creature rather than Creator	Idolatry and sexual immorality connected — both involve exchanging true object for false; “who is blessed forever” — doxology in the midst of indictment
26–27	Second “gave them over”: to dishonorable passions; women and men abandon natural relations for same-sex relations; receiving the due penalty	Same-sex behavior as a specific instance of the broader exchange of created order; “due penalty” — consequences built into the inversion
28–31	Third “gave them over”: to a debased mind; catalogue of vices — all forms of	“Debased” (<i>adokimos</i>) — failed the test; the mind that refused to acknowledge God

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
32	unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice, envy, murder, strife, deceit, etc.	is given over to malfunction; catalogue is comprehensive, not exhaustive
	Knowing God's decree yet continuing to practice and approve these things	Compound guilt: not only doing but approving; knowing the penalty and continuing; "approval" — active endorsement of others' sin

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
1	1–7	Prologue: Apostle, Gospel, and Greeting
2	8–15	Apostolic Desire: Paul's Debt and Eagerness
3	16–17	Thesis: The Gospel as the Power and Righteousness of God
4	18–23	The Human Condition: Suppression, Exchange, and Darkness
5	24–32	Divine Response: The Threefold Judicial Abandonment

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: The gospel alone answers the universal human condition of suppressed truth and divine wrath.

Primary Claim: God is demonstrating through Romans 1 that every human being stands without excuse before Him — having received enough light to know God and having deliberately turned from that light — so that the gospel of the righteousness of God revealed in Christ is not an optional upgrade but the only possible rescue from a wrath that is already being revealed.

Applications

1. (Mind/Belief) The wrath of God described in Romans 1:18–32 is not a future threat to be feared later — it is a present reality being revealed now, in the progressive moral and cognitive disorder that attends life organized around the creature rather than the Creator. Revise any understanding of God's wrath that reduces it to an eschatological event safely distant from the present. The person who has exchanged God for any functional substitute is already living in the early stages of the sentence. The gospel interrupts that sentence — which is why the gospel is urgent, not merely appealing.

2. (Affections/Worship) Paul grounds his eagerness to preach not in personal ambition or rhetorical confidence but in his identification of himself as a debtor — someone who has been given something he did not earn and now owes it to others (vv. 14–15). Examine what actually drives your engagement with the gospel in your relationships and community. If gospel-sharing feels like an optional spiritual practice rather than a debt being paid, the affective re-centering required is not more discipline but a deeper encounter with the gift — a re-experiencing of what the righteousness of God in Christ actually cost and what it actually rescued you from.

3. (Mind/Belief) Romans 1:19–20 establishes that every human being, without exception, has received sufficient knowledge of God through creation to be held accountable — not sufficient knowledge to be saved, but sufficient knowledge to be without excuse. This reframes every conversation about “those who have never heard.” The question is not whether they have received enough light to be saved by it; the question Paul answers is whether they have honored the light they received. The answer in verses 21–23 is that they did not. This is not a peripheral apologetic question — it is the ground on which the entire Pauline gospel stands. Get this wrong and the urgency of missions collapses.

4. (Will/Behavior) The progression in verses 21–23 is precise: the failure to honor God as God and give thanks to Him is the root from which futile thinking, darkened hearts, and idolatrous exchange grow. Apply this not to visible pagan idolatry but to the daily rhythms of your own life. Where you fail consistently to give God the honor and gratitude owed Him — in your ordinary work, family, rest, and success — you are participating in the same root pattern Paul indicts here. The correction is not primarily behavioral modification but the intentional, concrete, daily practice of Godward acknowledgment: naming what He has done, thanking Him for what He has given, and refusing to treat His gifts as your achievements.

5. (Affections/Worship) Paul says he is “not ashamed of the gospel” (v. 16) — a statement that presupposes real social and cultural pressure to be ashamed of it. The gospel’s apparent weakness, its offense, its foolishness to the sophisticated — these are real obstacles Paul has felt and is here actively refusing. Identify the specific form that shame takes in your context — the conversation you deflect, the belief you soften, the identity you downplay — and name it honestly. Paul’s antidote to shame is not a stronger argument but a deeper vision: the gospel is *the power of God for salvation*. Not your power. God’s power. The recalibration of desire required is to want God’s power to be known more than you want the approval of those who find the gospel embarrassing.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Romans 1 establishes two theological realities that govern everything that follows in the letter and in the gospel itself. First, the gospel is not a human achievement or philosophical system but “the power of God for salvation” — God Himself acting in history to rescue those who believe, by revealing His own righteousness in Christ.

Second, the human condition requiring this rescue is not moral weakness or ignorance but active, culpable suppression of known truth. Paul's doctrine of general revelation (vv. 19–20) grounds human accountability — every person has received sufficient light to know that God is and that He deserves worship — and Paul's description of the fall into idolatry (vv. 21–23) grounds the universality of guilt. The wrath of God, therefore, is not arbitrary divine anger but the judicial response of a holy God to the deliberate, sustained rejection of His self-disclosure. This passage defines both what humanity needs to be saved *from* and what makes the gospel *necessary*, rather than merely desirable.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Romans 1 is foundational to the Reformed understanding of total depravity — not the Caricature that sinners are incapable of any good action but the precise Pauline claim that the human will is actively and culpably oriented *away* from God, suppressing what is known of Him and substituting created things for the Creator. The threefold judicial abandonment (vv. 24, 26, 28) demonstrates that sin is not merely a moral deficit to be overcome by education or moral effort — it is a condition of divine abandonment that only divine rescue can reverse. Reformed theology's insistence on sovereign grace flows directly from this: if the wrath of God is already being revealed, if the mind is already debased, and if humanity is without excuse, then the gospel cannot be a cooperative project between human seeking and divine response — it must be God's unilateral act of righteousness credited to faith. The “from faith to faith” of verse 17 and the Habakkuk citation ground the Reformation's *sola fide* not as a sixteenth-century innovation but as the recovery of the Pauline — and ultimately prophetic — witness. The gospel Paul is not ashamed of is the same gospel the Reformation recovered: the righteousness of God, given as a gift, received through faith alone, in Christ alone.

Main Takeaway

You are not standing before God in a neutral position waiting to be evaluated — the wrath of God against the suppression of His truth is already being revealed, the exchange has already been made, and no amount of moral improvement resets the account. But the same God who reveals His wrath in Romans 1 reveals His righteousness in the gospel — and that righteousness is not something you achieve but something He declares over everyone who believes. The gospel is not an upgrade for those doing reasonably well. It is the only ground on which any person can stand.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Using 1:18–32 as cultural commentary rather than self-indictment.** The most common misuse of this passage — especially of verses 26–27 — is to deploy it as a critique of contemporary sexual ethics or cultural decline directed at others, while the congregation nods in agreement. Paul’s prosecutorial strategy is precisely designed to catch the self-righteous reader in 2:1: “Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges.” Preaching that lets the congregation off the hook as observers of Gentile depravity has missed Paul’s entire rhetorical purpose. The indictment is universal; preach it as universal.
- **Detaching the thesis (vv. 16–17) from the argument (vv. 18–32).** Verses 16–17 are frequently preached as an independent gospel summary — which they are — but without the grounding of verses 18–32, the gospel’s necessity is asserted but not demonstrated. Paul does not let the hearer appreciate the righteousness of God without first establishing the wrath of God. Preaching the thesis without the indictment produces a gospel that sounds attractive rather than necessary.
- **Reducing “suppression of the truth” to intellectual atheism.** Paul’s indictment is not aimed at self-declared atheists — it is aimed at every human being who has received general revelation and failed to honor God and give thanks to Him (v. 21). The suppression Paul describes is a condition of the heart, not a philosophical position. Morally respectable people who acknowledge God’s existence but organize their daily life around their own achievement, comfort, or reputation are fully within Paul’s indictment.
- **Treating the “gave them over” passages as mere description of natural consequences.** If God’s judicial abandonment is presented only as “sin has natural consequences,” the active, personal, and punitive dimension of divine wrath is lost. The text is clear: God gave them over — actively, judicially, in response to prior rejection. Softening this into natural causation domesticates the wrath of God and thereby minimizes what the gospel rescues from.
- **Over-focusing on verses 26–27 to the neglect of the structural argument.** The same-sex behavior in verses 26–27 is one instance of the broader exchange Paul has been describing since verse 21 — and it is followed immediately by a vice catalogue in verses 28–31 that includes sins most respectable church members recognize in themselves (covetousness, envy, disobedience to parents, foolishness). Preaching that dwells on verses 26–27 while breezing past the catalogue of verses 28–31 allows the congregation to locate the problem elsewhere. Paul does not allow that. The preacher should not either.
- **Failing to connect verse 17 to its Habakkuk background.** Paul’s citation of Habakkuk 2:4 is not decorative — it is the claim that the gospel’s principle (righteousness by faith) was already revealed in the prophets, making the gospel the

fulfillment of the Old Testament covenant rather than its replacement. Expositors who treat verse 17 as a New Testament statement only miss the canonical depth Paul is consciously invoking. The righteous have always lived by faith in what God has promised; the gospel reveals what that promise was always pointing toward.