

Romans 1:19

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 30 January 1983

Preacher: Donald Macleod

[0 : 00] We shall turn now to the epistle of Paul to the Romans in the first chapter. Reading at verse 19.

Romans chapter 1 verse 19. Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them. For God hath showed it unto them. The closing part of this chapter of Romans is well known because of its devastating description of the decadence of pagan civilization.

And it does indeed paint an appalling picture of depravity and abandonment. The prevalence of unnatural vice.

The collapse of elementary decency. And the prevalence of anarchy at a domestic and at a social level.

[1 : 26] And the portrayal is so appalling. Indeed so disgusting that one hesitates to read it in public or even for that matter in private.

And yet one could say that there is nothing that Paul speaks of here which cannot be matched apparently by many similar references from contemporary pagan sources.

because they paint an equally disturbing and abandoned picture. And it's important to remind ourselves that Paul's real purpose was not simply to give us this picture of the decadence of his own civilization.

It was to establish a point of contact for his gospel in the hearts of those pagans.

And Paul was going to do so by showing at last that these men had sinned and come short of the glory of God.

[2 : 48] His concern was to fasten upon them the charge of sin. Not the charge simply of immorality.

Or the charge of criminality. Or the charge of folly. But the charge of sin. And sin is always the violation of God's standards.

The violation of God's law. And Paul had to show that the pagans had indeed violated that law.

That they had sinned against God's standards. And to do so he had to show something else. He had to show that the pagans knew about God.

And that they knew also about God's standards. And that they knew about God's law. Because sin could only exist as the violation of a law understood.

[4 : 04] The violation of perceived principles. Now it was easy enough to show that the Jews had broken God's law.

Because the Jews had the Old Testament scriptures. They had this great knowledge given in God's special revelation. This knowledge of God's own glory.

This knowledge of God's standards. And Paul could show that the Jews had broken the laws that they knew. But Paul is also to show.

That the pagan world. That is the world without the Bible. The world without special revelation. The world with no prophets.

With no mosaic ritual. With no special disclosures of God. He had to show. That that world too had sinned.

[5 : 08] That that world too. Had broken God's standards. And had broken standards which they knew. And that is why the apostle gives us.

What I suppose is in many ways. The astonishing doctrine of her text. Tonight the doctrine. That God. Has revealed himself.

To every man. The doctrine that all men know. About God. Men. Says the apostle.

Hold the truth. In unrighteousness. You cannot argue. From their unrighteousness. That they don't know the truth.

They hold the truth. And when they commit unrighteousness. They do it. Not because they don't know. But because they violate.

[6 : 12] And they reject. That truth. That they know. And he goes on to say they know it. Because that which may be known of God. Is manifest in them.

For God has showed it. Unto them. God has shown to. Man universally. Great and foundation truths.

About himself. And his glory. And his government. Paul is sitting in verse 19. That there are limits. To what man can know. About God. He says. That which may be known. Because there is so much. That may not be known.

There is so much. That even. With the word of God. We don't know. There is so much. That even in glory. We shall not know. But that which may be known.

[7 : 11] The noble. God he says. Has made that manifest. In men. God has showed it to them. God has revealed himself to them.

God has unveiled himself. To them. And he goes on to say. Verse 20. For the invisible things of God. From the creation of the world.

Are clearly seen. Being understood. In or through. The things that are made. Those invisibles. Of God.

Are made. Comprehensible. In the things. That are made. The invisibles. Are revealed.

In the visibles. Of God's creation. If one might use the jargon. That may mean something. To one or two. Paul is saying to us.

[8 : 08] That the. Epiphenomena. Are made evident. In the phenomena themselves. Those things about God. That we cannot see. Are made evident.

Are revealed. In what we can see. From the time. Of creation. That God. In the creation. And so we have this great doctrine.

That God has revealed himself. To absolutely. Every human being. It's a doctrine. Which lies. At the very foundation.

Of Paul's gospel. It's a doctrine. Which you'll find. In the very opening statement. Of our own confession of faith.

Which tells us. That the light of nature. And the things that are made. Do so far manifest.

[9 : 06] The power. And the wisdom of God. As to leave men. Without excuse. It is in fact.

One of the great. Gifts of John Calvin. To Protestant theology. Because Calvin told us. That there is.

An implanted knowledge. Of God. In the heart. Of every man. An implanted. Awareness of God.

Now you will notice. That Calvin does not say. That there is. An innate. Or an inborn knowledge. Calvin did not say.

Because. He did not want to give the impression. That this knowledge. Was ever. Independent of God. But there is a knowledge. Which God has implanted.

[10 : 04] In the heart of every man. There is an awareness. Of God. That God has situated. In the very center. Of our human consciousness.

There is an awareness. Of our dependence on God. An awareness of our. Accountability. To God. And that is part. Of what we are.

As human beings. And it is part of. The very meaning of being human. That we are creatures. In whose hearts. God has implanted.

A knowledge. Not only. Of ourselves. Of self-awareness. Not only of the universe. But. An awareness. Of God himself.

As the one. On whom we depend. And as the one. To whom. We are accountable. So here we have it. The great. Foundation.

[11 : 01] Doctrine. Even those. To commit unrighteousness. Hold the truth. That which may be known about God.

Is manifest in me. Because God has shown it to them. God's invisibles. Are revealed. In the visibles.

And the tangibles. And the measurables. Of our own creation. There is this. Great fact. Of an implanted. Awareness. Of God himself.

That the Lord has given. To absolutely. Every creature. Let me for a moment. Scout. This doctrine. Let me. Move around it.

For a little. We ask first of all. Where does this revelation. Come from. How does God. Reveal himself.

[11:57] In this way. To every man. The answer is. As the apostle. As we've seen. In the things. That are made. This universe. This.

Extant universe. This universe. It is simply there. It stands there. It confronts us. It is there. Simply before us. It is there. In incredible. Vastness. It is there. In. Unspeakable.

Complexity. It is there. In enthralling beauty. It is there. In all. Its majesty. And there.

In the very fact. Of its existence. The very fact. That it stands. Out. It is pointing. Beyond itself. This great fact.

[12:56] That something. That something exists. Pointing. To something. That always existed. Ah. Because. Out of nothing.

Nothing. Comes. This universe. That speaks of. God's ability. To contrive. And to conceive it.

Of God's power. To originate it. Of God's power. To sustain it. Of God's power. Ultimately.

To dissolve it. The heavens. God's glory. Do declare. The skies. As handworks. Preach.

Day. Utters speech. Today. And night. Tonight. Doth knowledge. Teach. The sheer.

[13:52] Universalness. Of it all. That whatever. There is man. Confronted. By his environment.

There is man. Confronted. By revelation.

By the work. Of God. You remember. We have it up to. Christopher. Randy. St. Paul's. Cathedral. It says.

Quite simply. If you want. To see. His memorial. Look around you. And surely.

The argument. Is quite legitimate. In relation. To God. As we stand. Shall we say. For a moment. In the center. Of the desert. Of our own existence.

And we say. If you want. To see. God's. Memorial. God's. Self testimony. Then.

[14:53] You look around you. We consider. The heavens. The work. Of his hands. We look. Upwards. At the glory.

Of. The universe. Around us. And there. We are in contact. With this. Great fact. To which Paul points.

God's. Invisibles. Revealed. In those things. That are visible. Paul. Would I think.

To go beyond that. And he would say this to us. That God is also revealed. In our own consciences. He speaks in the second chapter.

Of the Gentiles. In verse 14. Of chapter 2. Which have not the law. Yet they do by nature.

[15:48] The things contained in the law. And they thereby show. He says in verse 15. They show the work of the law. Written in their hearts.

Their conscience. Also bearing witness. And their thoughts meanwhile. Accusing. Or else excusing. One another. The law of God.

Says the apostle. Is written. On the heart of every human being. This great faculty of conscience. This arbiter of human conduct.

And human behavior. It is again. Uneradicable fact. Of our human existence. That we hear.

This great ought. This. Sense of obligation. This sense of right and wrong.

[16:48] This sense. Of accountability. I can only ask. Each one of ourselves. Whether it is true.

Is it true of us. True of me. That. In me. There is the work of the law. Written in my heart. That in me.

There is conscience. Bearing witness. Not only tell me. What I have done. But telling me. The moral quality. Of what I have done.

I put it simply to you. In your own self-knowledge. I would ask. Do we understand.

What Hamlet meant. When he said. Conscience. Doth make cowards. Of us all. Not only.

[17:47] In Hamlet's own. Personal conflict. As he ponders. Self-destruction. Unconscious. Enervates.

Takes away. The resolution. Because he knows. He is not ready to die. Not ready to meet God.

But I go beyond that. And I say. How often. Has conscience. Given us pause. Even those.

Who claim. To be religious. Even those. Who might scoff. At the Christian faith. Yet. In there.

In the nature. In the very structures. Of personal. Humanness. There. There is this. Sense.

[18:45] Of obligation. There is this awareness. Of accusation. There is this fear. Of accountability. This voice.

That comes. From outside. That comes. In unconditionalness. That comes. Without partiality. That comes.

With this terrible. And this absolute. Authority. So that I can follow. What Hamlet says. Yes. Conscience.

Does make a coward. Of me. Conscience. Does make cowards. Of us all. God is revealed. In the glory.

Of the world. In which he has placed us. God is revealed. In the. Imperatives. And in the sanctions. [19 : 43] Of this. Irrepressible voice. Inside. Of ourselves. I'd go beyond that still.

Back to Matthew. Chapter 6. In the Lord's own great lessons. Behold. The birds of the air. Behold. The lilies of the field. Behold. Him is this. Because. There too. There is revelation. Your heavenly father.

Feeds them. Your heavenly father. Clothes them. In other words. The Lord is saying to us. That's not only.

In the construction. And composition. Of the universe. But in the actual. Day by day. Providence of God. As we see.

[20 : 45] The birds fed. As we see. The fields clothed. As we experience. From day to day. The sun shining.

And the rain falling. As we experience. Fruitful seasons. As we experience. The regularity. And the predictability.

And the coherence. And the intelligibility. The sheer. Astonishing. Mathematically. Exact logic. Of the world.

In which God has placed us. As we experience that. That there again. Christ says. We are in contact. With revelation. A revelation.

That speaks. Of the love. And the magnificence. And the care. And the fidelity. Of God. So that. Even. A wordsworth.

[21 : 40] Who was no Christian. That he could say. To me. The meanest. Flower. That grows. Can give thoughts. That do often lie.

Too deep. For tears. This. Ability. This interaction. Again. Between man. And his environment. Where man.

Is. Moved. Into. Self-awareness. Where man is. Humbled. Where man is. In words. For terms. Moved.

To tears. By what he sees. And the procedures. And processes. By which God. Maintains. And preserves. And governs.

The world. In which. By his grace. Man finds himself. So that it's revelation. In the sheer existence. [22 : 34] Of the universe. That is revelation. In the voice of conscience. That is revelation. In the providences.

That we see. All around us. And I will dare to say. That Paul is also saying. In this chapter to us. That there is revelation. As we see God's. Process. Of retribution. Work itself out. In human history. Revelation. A revelation. In a process. Of retribution. Within human history. Because what Paul is going to argue.

Right through this great section. From verse 18. Is that the wrath of God. Is revealed from heaven. Against all ungodliness. The wrath of God.

[23 : 34] Is revealed. Against ungodliness. Now part. Of the magnificence. Of this chapter. As a.

As a mere human composition. Is the way. That Paul. Inverts. Our. I suppose. Predictable approach. To this kind of teaching.

Because we would say. When Paul goes through. All those terrible things. All those. Unnatural sins. Those. Unnatural vices. This total collapse.

Of decency. All these. Perversions. As we would say. There is the. The ungodliness. Inviting God's judgment. Another great thing.

Of course. About this chapter. Is. That Paul. Sees it so differently. Paul. Did not see. The homosexuality.

[24 : 34] And the collapse. Of. Domestic bonds. The collapse. Of commercial. Relationships. Paul. Paul. Didn't see these. As the ungodliness.

That invited. God's judgment. Paul. Instead. Saw these. As God's judgment. They were not.

The ungodliness. Inviting judgment. They were themselves. A judgment. God. Gave them over. To reprobate mind. And Paul.

Saw. The evidences. Of that abandonment. Of that. Reprobacy. He saw. He saw. God's judgment. In the moral decadence.

Itself. In the sheer. Anarchy. Of the civilization. There. Paul saw. The judgment. And the wrath. Of God. On what?

[25 : 31] On man's religion. Man. Man. Man. Man. Knew the truth. And man. Had perverted. The truth.

In the interest. Of idolatry. Man. And man. And man. Man had formed. And fashioned. The most. Disgusting. And the most degrading. Religions. and because of man's religions man was immoral and Paul's teaching was not that one day God would judge the immorality Paul's teaching was that the immorality was itself the sign of the judgment it was the judgment God had given them over and Paul saw the voice of God Paul saw the judgment of God Paul saw the vengeance of God in the abandonment of the civilization God was not asleep God had not simply walked away helpless from the situation God was judging it in the reprobacy in the abandonment in the permissiveness and the promiscuity and the terrible unnaturalness and the viciousness of that civilization there he says is the judgment of God so we have this elemental principle

God revealing himself to every man doing it in the extant universe itself doing it in the voice of human conscience doing it in the occurrences of our daily providence and doing it in his judicial abandonment of an ungodly civilization in all these Paul would say there is the voice of God there is the unveiling of God there is God speaking about himself let me for a moment add two or three things to that to give the doctrine some kind of completeness one of the most dishonor things of the very days the sheer comprehensiveness of what is revealed about God in this general revelation it is by no means a minimal or a very limited or very restricted complex of truths about God that are revealed in this general disclosure of God

Paul tells us that God reveals what may be known God reveals the invisibles and these invisibles he says in verse 20 are his eternal power and his Godhead how much does a natural man instinctively know about God well Paul's view is that he knows his eternal power and Godhead he knows the Godhead of God he knows the divineness of God the Godness of God he knows the numinousness the worshipableness of God in other words as man interacts with his environment as man listens to his conscience as man is aware of history man is aware of the divineness the deity to the otherness that Godhead the heavenliness the otherness of God man is aware of that God's Godhead God's worshipableness is revealed to every man the awareness of a form of existence that is different from the material different from the human different from everything with which we are familiar on earth man is aware of the Godness of God man is aware of the eternity of God man is aware of the power of God and that's one of the greatest things if we go back into human language human religious language we find in almost every civilization that the word for God comes from a root that means power that is how man first experiences

[30 : 30] God how man is first aware of God as power the power that created the power that sustains and I think also and painfully the power that threatens and the power that destroys and there it is revealed in the things that are made God has shown it to them God has shown you his Godhead God has shown you his own eternalness God has shown you his own power but it goes beyond because Paul also speaks in this chapter of the wrath of God the Lord speaks in Matthew 5 and 6 of the love of God the Bible speaks elsewhere of creation revealing the wisdom of God and I want you for a moment to think of this natural man this man has never heard the gospel this man may come from a very decadent and totally godless civilization what does that man know what did these

Romans know and all the fornicating and all the bestiality and all the depravity what did they know they knew Paul says that God was that God was eternal that God was powerful that God was angry they knew God's love they knew God's wisdom now I say to you that's an impressive catalog and Paul is saying to us the whole Bible is saying to us that every man is equipped with that degree of knowledge of God he's aware of God of God's power of God's eternalness of God's wisdom of God's love aware too of the fact of judgment and that is part of the equipment of every human being let me add this to not only is this knowledge surprisingly comprehensive but this revelation is astonishingly perspicuous perspicuous my jargon perspicuous and non-jargon clear you see marvelous it is there in verse 20 the invisible things of God from the time of creation are clearly

seen now you take your clearly seen you go back into verse 19

God has showed there are two great processes there is a divine process of showing and there is a human process of seeing and the apostle is saying to us that the divine process of showing is such that the human process of seeing is clear it is not at all the teaching that man is surrounded by revelation but man is blind it is the terrible teaching that man is surrounded by revelation and man sees and man sees clearly in other words man's crime is not that he is blind at the level of perception at the level of intellect at the level of apprehension man's crime is that he is not blind that he sees that he understands but he does not do because you have the combination of those two great words

God's invisibles are clearly seen God's invisibles are understood from the things that are made man is surrounded with revelation and the result is man sees clearly the result is man understands and when man chooses to live in the defiance of God when man lives in the violation of conscience in the rejection of divine standards he cannot argue that God didn't show him he cannot argue that he was blind he cannot argue that he didn't see he can't argue that he didn't understand that is the presupposition of the whole of Paul's gospel God has shown it to man has seen clearly and man has understood from the things that are made so the revelation is surprisingly comprehensive and the revelation is astonishingly clear and perspicuous and the revelation is absolutely indelible and ineradicable and you ask on what do I base that well if you come to the terrible conclusion of this passage from verse 29 downwards you have this terrible summation of the civilization to which Paul was called to minister they were filled with all unrighteousness with fornication wickedness covetousness maliciousness fool of envy murder debate deceit malignity whisperers what an astonishing juxtaposition of vices murder whisperers backbiter backbiter in the foolish haters of god spiteful proud boasters inventors of evil things disobedient pairs without understanding covenant or contract breakers without natural or domestic affection implacable unmerciful death it's a picture of terrible abandonment and then in the heart of that picture of that darkness there is a spark there is a light and the great thing is that without the light there wouldn't be the darkness it's there in verse 32 knowing the judgment of god you can take verse 29 and verse 30 and say in verse 31 all these are vices and yet verse 32 begins with a virtue the virtue of knowledge they know the judgment of god it is in that virtue in that knowledge that the whole possibility of their depravity lies the terrible point is even in their abandonment they know you can't look at them and say if only these poor men knew the judgment of god as is paul don't see that they do know you follow man on this great downward spiral into the abyss of depravity the nadir of his decadence and this knowledge follows we cannot send our god consciousness away we cannot eradicate it by depravity we cannot delude it by abandonment by debauchery by prodigality no matter how low they go they know the judgment of god they would carry that with them into all their carousers into all their brothels into all their bestiality they would carry their knowledge of the judgment of god and at last they would carry it with them to hell itself it is ineradicable there is no man so abandoned said calvin but god and conscience do occasionally summon him before their tribunal it seems to me that the whole picture of depravity and abandonment that we have here is so different to our natural assumptions about natural men there are these people and their depravity is at the furthest possible point of its development it is at its most mature and at its most terrifying and its most appalling they seem [40 : 02] to have lost everything but they haven't says Paul not everything they haven't lost their knowledge of the judgment of god they still know that those who commit such things are worthy of death and then you might say well surely that will give them pause surely that will pull them up well it says Paul one might think so but they not only do the same but they praise those who do them they know the judgment and yet they do those things that they know will bring them to judgment and they not only do them but they admire and they applaud those who perpetrate these enormities this terrible reversal of values surely it shows that they have lost all sense of conscience and all sense of morality surely it shows that they have become totally amoral and totally standardless never think that's as Paul no human being is amoral no human being is standardless no human being has lost his conscience no human being has lost his awareness of God you cannot argue from the most appalling depravity you cannot argue that a man has lost his conscience well let me very briefly ask what are the implications and practice of this teaching

I just want to mention two or three points very very briefly the first is this that it is this implanted knowledge of God that is our point of contact in all evangelism today we evangelize not a Christian society which knows the truth but doesn't want the truth we evangelize a post Christian society

which does not know Christian truth a society that often claims to be agnostic and often claims to be atheistic and often aspires to being religious but sometimes we say despairingly these people don't understand we can't get any point of contact they don't have our framework of reference we can't make them see we can't get through to them and Paul is saying to us that there is always the point of contact there is always the awareness of God there is always the conscience there is always the apprehension of judgment there is always the involvement with the environment there is speaking to them of God's eternity

God's power God's goodness God's wisdom and God's Godhead that's why if you go to Acts 18 and you see Paul preaching to the Areopagus to all those wise non-Christian philosophers at Athens you will find their jargon you'll find the word religion you'll find the word God you'll find the word repentance you'll find the word judgment you'll find the concept of sin creation and you say but these are pagans maybe he says Paul they still know religion they still know what God is they still know what repentance means they still know what judgment is they still know what sin is there is a conceptual framework there is a common vocabulary there are assumptions one can make there is a point of contact it is never my business to convince men that

God exists it may be my business to reinforce that sense to bring it up by argument to the top of men's minds it may be my business to make men look that great fact in the face but it's not my business to implant the knowledge of God God has showed it to them God has made himself manifest within these people God has planted the awareness of himself in the very depths of their hearts there is always conscience as our ally and that surely is of monumental importance in our evangelism this assurance that there is a point of contact the second point is this we have the right to tell the natural man the

Christless man and post Christian man we have the right to accuse him of sin we can accuse him of sin because he knows and he can never say I wouldn't have done it if I had known and he can never protest the injustice of the accusation on the grounds of his ignorance why because he is not ignorant Paul tells us that when the heathens precipitated their idolatrous religions that was not the result of their ignorance it was the result of their holding the truth in unrighteousness they were suppressing it and they were distorting it and they were arresting it and they were misapplying it but they were not ignorant let me put it this way the charge which God may bring even against the unevangelized is that they all knew more of

[46 : 50] God's will than they did there are some who can say Lord we didn't know all the truth and God will take that fact into account and mitigate and modify their judgment but no man can say Lord we knew nothing because God will say then did you not stand in the world did you never look up never consider the heavens never watch the birds never behold the lilies never look at the sun shining and the showers of rain falling never see the fruitful fields was there no voice of conscience were there no moments of fear and what shall happen exactly what Paul says in

Romans 3 the world every mouth stopped and all the world become guilty before God in verse 19 of the third chapter it's an amazing thing that every mouth may be stopped it seems to me tonight that the instinctive plea in mitigation offered by every accused human being is Lord I didn't know and the great fact arising out of this emphasis on revelation given to all men is that it is now impossible for men to make that plea the last excuse is gone because they held truth and they cannot say Lord I know I was unrighteous but I didn't have the truth can't say that can't say I was unrighteous but I didn't have all the truth I didn't have all the truth Christians had but not say I had no truth we had truth which we perverted and truth we suppressed and truth we silenced that is why every mouth is stopped and the whole world is guilty before God and my last point is a terribly obvious one that it applies to those who have only the light of nature who read no book but the book of heaven and heard no voice but the voice of the birds and seen no glory but the glory of the flowers how will it go with those to whom

God spoke by the prophets and God spoke by the apostles and God spoke by the preacher and God spoke in Jesus Christ there is no one here tonight I doubt left to the voice of the birds the glory you are people to whom line upon line precept upon precept verse by verse chapter by chapter book by book testament by testament sermon by sermon and plea by plea God has given the truth I can say to you all that you hold the truth and not one of you can deny it but I can say to some that you hold the truth and unrighteousness

I can say to some that you are suppressing the truth that you are holding down the truth that you are keeping the lay down the truth that you are dead frightened of it you are using all your might and

all your moral energy to prevent the gospel erupting and taking over I am sometimes of the opinion that some of our people who stay away from our services do so because they're afraid of being converted they are holding the lid on the truth they can feel its force they can feel its demand that they should worship God and be thankful the demand that they should bow the knee the demand that they should embrace

[52 : 22] Christ accept receive surrender to the Lord of glory that truth in all the glory of its lodges is building up a terrible pressure in the depths of their souls and their setting on the truth just as those old pagans held down the truth and unrighteousness and I can only say to you that if it's true of those pagans that one day every mouth shall be stopped then it is even more true of you how shall you escape if you neglect so great salvation a salvation articulated not in the silent beauties of a complex universe but in the articulated affirmations of the

Christian gospel let us pray oh lord we ask thee to do with thy word what none of us can do with it at one level to forgive it at another level to use it and to apply it may it become thy word with power a word to convict and to arrest a word to teach and to make us wise in bringing thy gospel to others and a word oh lord also to expose our own follies our own disobedience as we hold thy truth in unrighteousness lord bring each one of us face to face with the truth about himself and the truth about thee for thy glory sake amen