The series moves this week to the book of Romans. Romans is the first in the letters of the New Testament, is the latest of Paul’s undisputed letters to be written, and it contains the longest and most complex sustained arguments in any of Paul’s letters. We must remember that Romans was written to a group of people Paul never met. Also, it is difficult to take sections of the letter to study without taking into account the larger theological statement Paul puts forward through the entire book. Broad themes like “righteousness”, “justice”, “salvation”, and “obedience” are found throughout the book. The treatise is an appeal for holy living, among all Christians – both Jew and Gentile. It is a book intended to persuade and to encourage support of Paul’s desire to go to Spain.

Against this backdrop, we are to consider the early parts of this text, particularly 1:16-23, 28-32 for this week’s lesson. The very familiar verse, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” begins a section that reminds us of the “righteousness” or “justice” of God. That this is first offered to the “Jew”, then to the Greek, indicates a Jewish point of view for Paul. The “power” of God – a declaration found throughout the text – is a reminder that God has triumphed, that salvation is the result of God giving life and making things right in the relationship between human beings and God.

In the face of this new reality, there are still those, Paul declares, that know all of these things about God and God’s nature and God’s desire to make things right, but who have chosen not to live into this reality. They knew God, but they did not honor him as God or give thanks to God (v.21). Like those in Zephaniah that struggled with idolatry, Paul indicates that these person have also exchanged “the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four footed animals or reptiles (v. 23).

The consequences of their actions – namely ignoring what they have known about God – is that God has allowed them (given them up) to the things they should not be doing. These things at their core are wicked, evil, and malicious and Paul gives a long list of characteristics that show what a life, not centered in the right things of God, looks like (v.30-32).

The passage concludes with a jarring reminder that “They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die – yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them.”

Application

One of the hard realities I have had to learn as a pastor is that you cannot save people from themselves. My heart has been burdened on many occasions to spend time in pastoral conversations with people who were involved in things that were not leading to abundant life. These activities were causing difficulties for them personally, they were affecting the relationships they had with spouses, family members, friends, co-workers, and were debilitating in so many ways. What was so frustrating
for me was that these persons often knew that the things they were doing were creating the stresses they were experiencing in their life. In other words, they knew the difference between right and wrong, and yet they continued to persist in behaviors that would lead to less than desired outcomes.

I have felt for those “innocent” persons caught up in these situations, particularly children, who had their lives affected through the selfish actions of those who neglected their covenants and responsibilities for the sake of pursuing their own desires. The brokenness that is experienced in these moments continues to create difficulties throughout life for those who experience significant harm at the hands of others and through no fault of their own.

Last week, I shared briefly about watching our own children grow into the knowledge of right and wrong. Abigail and I have the responsibility of helping to shape their understandings of what they should do and should not do. We also have to discipline them when they choose to act in ways that are contrary to how they should act. We frame it for them by saying they have a choice – they can choose the “easy” way or the “hard” way. What we mean by this is they can choose the easier way, which is to do the right thing, to tell the truth, to follow directions, to listen, and to be nice to one another, or they can choose the “hard” way, doing what they want to do, not listening, trying to make sure they get their way, or not sharing. They are of the ages now, 5 and 3, where they know the choice they are making. They do things from time to time that they know they should not do.

When we look at Paul’s life, I continue to be struck by that initial declaration in v. 16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” Paul was open to letting God’s power work in his life and he committed himself to seeking God’s will in his life. Paul would be the first to tell you he was not perfect – and his past was sordid – but Paul was earnest and sincere in his desire to experience the full saving knowledge of God. Paul made a choice in his life and because he lived faithfully, we are the benefactors of his faithfulness. Paul bore witness to this power in his life, ministry, and writings that we continue to study today. While so many do choose to ignore that which they know – the consequences of their actions contribute to the brokenness of this world and we are called to work for the reconciliation of this brokenness. We can also seek to live lives that would seek not to contribute to this brokenness further, instead claiming the power of the gospel in our lives and not being ashamed to declare that it is the power of God that has saved and through faith in the saving power of Christ, we choose to seek to live in right and just ways with all in the world.