

IGNORING GOD'S PLAIN TRUTH

DEVOTIONAL READING: Psalm 52

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Romans 1:18-32

ROMANS 1:18-32

¹⁸ The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, ¹⁹ since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. ²⁰ 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 people are without excuse.

²¹ 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. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ 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, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. ³² 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.

KEY VERSE

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 people are without excuse.
—*Romans 1:20*

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. List some ways that people change the truth of God into lies.
2. Explain how God's general revelation makes humans morally responsible to him.
3. Identify in his or her life one besetting sin and the worldly lie behind it and make a plan for change.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. Accept No Substitutes
- B. Lesson Background
- I. Willfully Ignorant (ROMANS 1:18-20)
 - A. Revealed Wrath (v. 18)
 - B. Revealed Glory (vv. 19, 20)
 - In a Kansas Wheat Field*
- II. Displacing God (ROMANS 1:21-23)
 - A. Darkened Hearts (vv. 21, 22)
 - B. Graven Images (v. 23)
 - The Rise of the Nones*
- III. Receiving Penalty (ROMANS 1:24-32)
 - A. Unnatural Relations (vv. 24-27)
 - B. Corrupt Minds (vv. 28-32)
- Conclusion
 - A. Pointing Fingers
 - B. Prayer
 - C. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Accept No Substitutes

The title above is a classic slogan in advertising. Many businesses try to persuade us that their products are original, genuine, the best. Of course, in some cases we cannot tell the difference between the so-called genuine item and a substitute. We occasionally may conclude that the substitute offers better value. But in many instances, we avoid substitutes and insist on “the real thing.”

Today’s text is about life’s most important choice regarding the genuine and substitutes. Our text insists that the one, true God is clearly revealed to all people. None can rightly say that they have no knowledge of the true God.

Tragically, however, we see how people ignore the true God and accept substitutes. That choice is tragic because it leads to the degradation and disharmony that ruin lives. More seriously, it also leads to eternal punishment.

B. Lesson Background

Our lesson text comes from Paul’s letter to the Romans, probably written from the city of Corinth during his third missionary journey, in about AD 58. The church in Rome had been planted by others many years before, and Paul sought the Roman Christians’ support as he planned to travel to Spain (Romans 15:23-28).

The nature of the church in Rome was influenced by an edict, issued by Emperor Claudius in about AD 49, that had forced Jews living in the city to leave (Acts 18:2). The Roman historian Suetonius tells us that Claudius “banished from Rome all the Jews, who were continually making disturbances at the instigation of one Chrestus,” the word *Chrestus* likely referring to *Christ*. This experience probably fostered a certain division within the Roman church between Gentile and Jewish believers, with each group contending that it had better claim on salvation in Christ than did the other (compare Romans 11:13-24, lesson 12).

The expulsion of Jews from Rome resulted in Gentile Christians being in the majority in the church there, if they had not been the majority already (Romans 1:5, 6, 13). Their majority status seems to have continued even after the death of Claudius in AD 54 allowed Jews to return to the imperial city (compare Acts 18:2 with Romans 16:3-5a). Much of Paul’s letter is therefore directed specifically to the Gentile believers there (11:13).

I. Willfully Ignorant

(ROMANS 1:18-20)

A. Revealed Wrath (v. 18)

18a. The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people,

Paul addresses the division noted in the Lesson Background by noting that all people, Gentile and Jew alike, are guilty of sin (compare Romans 3:23). The apostle’s broad statement in the verse before us allows no exceptions. There is no division between Gentile and Jew in this regard!

Unlike the inconsistent anger that humans exhibit, *the wrath of God* is utterly consistent. The righteous God is angry only with what violates his purpose. His wrath ultimately destroys completely, but it destroys only that which destroys the good. So, Paul says, God’s wrath is set against *all the godlessness and wickedness of people*.

The word *godlessness* is commonly used to refer to inappropriate, dishonorable behavior toward the deity. The word *wickedness* is used to refer to behavior that violates standards of justice and goodness. The first suggests rebellion against God; the second, disregard for other people.

God's wrath stands against people in general because people generally have actively destroyed God's good purpose (compare [Colossians 3:5, 6](#)).

18b. who suppress the truth by their wickedness,

Are people even aware of what they have done? The word *suppress* indicates that the answer is *yes*. In their pursuit of things that violate justice and goodness, people censor the truth that God reveals. Ignorance of God's truth is willful ignorance. Humans live not in ignorance but in denial.

HOW TO SAY IT

Claudius *Claw-dee-us*.

Corinth *Kor-inth*.

Suetonius *Soo-toe-nec-us*.

B. Revealed Glory ([vv. 19, 20](#))

19. since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them.

God has made truth about himself clear to all people. It exists in or among us, well within the reach of all. God has revealed it; clever people did not discover it in their cleverness or good people in their goodness (compare [Acts 14:17](#)).

20. 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 people are without excuse.

The revealed truth concerns God himself, the one who cannot be seen. He reveals himself in what can be seen: the world that he created (compare [Psalm 19:1](#)). His creation demonstrates *his eternal power*: only one who exists without beginning could cause the beginning of the universe. His creation demonstrates his *divine nature*, or his very essence as God. Only a God greater than all things can be the Creator of all things.

Paul's argument is simple and devastating: the very fact that the world exists tells us that we owe ourselves to the God who made us. To live as if we were in charge instead of God is to deny and suppress the most essential of truths.

IN A KANSAS WHEAT FIELD

I was no more than 10 years old. It was the dark of night, and Mother was driving our old station wagon on the Kansas turnpike, to visit relatives in Topeka, when the car began making a strange noise. Spying a farmhouse on the other side of the highway, she pulled over and set out for it on foot to get help. (No cell phones in the 1960s!)

In her absence, restlessness impelled me toward the adjacent wheat field. It was a time of year when no crop was growing; the field was barren of everything except dirt clods. Scaling the token fence, I walked about five yards into the field, where I proceeded to lie on my back and look up.

What I saw absolutely stunned me: it was the majestic Milky Way, clearly visible from horizon to horizon. There was nothing to block or dim the view—no trees, no clouds, no "light pollution" of a city, no moon. I had seen stars before, of course, but never like this! That's when I knew that there had to be a Creator. There just had to be.

When I think of those who live as if there is no Creator, I wonder if they have ever bothered to look up. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands" ([Psalm 19:1](#)).—R. L. N.

What Do You Think?

In what specific ways do you see creation revealing God's nature?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding His power
- Regarding His goodness
- Regarding His wisdom
- Other

II. Displacing God

([ROMANS 1:21-23](#))

A. Darkened Hearts ([vv. 21, 22](#))

21. 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.

Though people know God—that is, know that he must exist—they do not respond as that truth requires. God the Creator should be glorified

and submitted to as the all-powerful king. He should be thanked as the one who sustains and blesses.

Failure to glorify and thank God comes through a process of self-delusion. Humans use their capacity for thought to ignore and explain away God's glory. *Their thinking*, the complex workings of the mind, end up being *futile*, empty, and without purpose or meaning. The power to reason becomes pointless when God is ignored. The human heart, our capacity to make decisions and commitments, ends up being *darkened*, filled with ignorance and falsehood (compare [Ephesians 4:17, 18](#)).

Those who reject God build their lives on a lie, and thereby ruin themselves with the rebellious self-destruction that results. As he makes this point, Paul is addressing the pride that many people have in human accomplishments in discovery. That is indeed a great capacity, created by God as a blessing. But without knowledge of God, it becomes the seedbed of a curse.

22. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools

The accomplishments of the human mind are considerable, as amazing in Paul's time as in ours. But in ignoring God, human wisdom becomes a disguise for foolishness. [Psalms 14:1; 53:1](#) declare that the one who says there is no God is a fool, and Paul draws on that idea here. To deny the existence of the Creator God is to commit the most fundamental and destructive foolishness (compare [Jeremiah 10:14; 1 Corinthians 1:20](#)).

B. Graven Images (v. 23)

23. and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

The fundamental misunderstanding of God makes itself known in the creation of idols. Paul's world is full of physical images created to represent mistaken notions of the spirit world (compare [Acts 17:16](#)). Idols typically are images of humans, but they also mimic other creatures; Paul lists here a range of such creatures that are depicted in idols.

The absurdity of exchanging the true God for such things is obvious. Paul underlines this point with one contrast: humans and animals, unlike God, are *mortal*. Their vulnerabilities are constantly apparent. How can anyone be so foolish as to trade the eternal, all-powerful God for a creature that lives briefly and dies unnoticed?

What Do You Think?

How do we guard against subconsciously attaching more importance to temporary things than to the eternal God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding relationships
- Regarding social causes
- Other

THE RISE OF THE NONES

Perhaps you have heard someone say, "I'm a spiritual person, but I'm not religious." The Pew Research Center calls these people *the Nones*. They are the fastest growing group in terms of spiritual orientation, comprising one-fifth of the U.S. public and one-third of adults under 30. They are distinct from agnostics and atheists. The Nones may consider themselves to be spiritual, but they want nothing to do with organized religion. As one self-identified None put it, "I like the ambiguity of going without a label. I prefer to stress the importance of acting with compassion rather than choosing a predetermined system of beliefs."

The logic problems here are easy to see: the "rather than" declaration implies that one must make an *either/or* choice instead of adopting a *both/and* stance; to want to be known as one who acts with compassion is itself to embrace a label; etc. But those problems ultimately are secondary to this one: unless one acknowledges the existence of the Creator God, then how one thinks and acts will have no firm anchor point.

Such was the problem of the idol worshippers of Paul's day, and such is the road that the Nones of today are on. How do we reach them?—C. R. B.

III. Receiving Penalty

([ROMANS 1:24-32](#))

A. Unnatural Relations (vv. 24-27)

24. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

Paul now begins a series of three statements that show how the denial of God correlates with destructive, debasing behaviors. Each statement begins with the phrase *God gave them over*. In response to human rejection of God, he allows people to have in full the things that they choose in place of him. In effect, God says, "If that is what you want, I will let you have that in abundance."

The word *therefore* indicates that the first *gave them over* statement links the idolatry of [verse 23](#) with *sexual impurity*, two seemingly unrelated behaviors. Paul speaks of human sexual desire operating without boundaries, which causes people to pursue things that are wrong by nature. Sexual activity that does not acknowledge God's purpose for human sexuality—its expression only in the context of faithful, exclusive marriage to one person of the opposite sex—becomes something by which people bring degradation to *their bodies*. Having lost sight of God, people live in a way that loses sight even of themselves.

25. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

Paul repeats his point about humans having traded the true, eternal God for false gods that are represented by images of created things. This repetition further ties idolatry to sexual immorality, both being expressions of rejecting God. In Paul's world, the worship of idols often involves sexual misdeeds, sometimes with prostitutes of both sexes who work from pagan temples.

What Do You Think?

In what ways do people today exchange the truth of God for delusions and untruth? Why is that?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- In goals they pursue
- In how they spend money
- In what they admire
- In what they worry about
- Other

26. Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones.

The second statement in which Paul says *God gave them over* focuses on the further degradation of humanity in sexual sin. *Shameful lusts* are desires for things that bring dishonor. Where sexual sin is concerned, the person who is degraded by such behavior is ultimately oneself. In sexual sin, one sins against one's own body ([1 Corinthians 6:18](#)).

As the rest of the Bible does, Paul takes for granted that sexuality is intended for expression with the opposite sex. So he speaks of women exchanging *natural sexual relations for unnatural ones* as a way of referring to sexual activity between members of the same sex. Everyone can know the true nature of human sexuality. But when humans reject the true God, they come to reject even the obvious.

27. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Paul underlines his point by reminding readers of men who pursue sexual activity with other men. Again, his assumption is that same-sex activity represents rejection of the obvious design of sexuality (compare [Leviticus 18:22](#); [20:13](#); [1 Corinthians 6:9, 10](#)). In the pursuit of what is not the Creator's intention, people experience payback (*the due penalty*); that is, the sinful act itself is a fitting punishment for the rebellion that allows it.

The issue of homosexual relations ("gay rights") is much debated today. Many argue that same-sex relations are "natural," because some people are persistently attracted to members of the same sex. As we consider this question, we should realize that all of us are fallen sexually from a biblical perspective. That is, we all at one time or another desire to satisfy strong sexual urges with acts outside the Creator's design of faithfulness in opposite-sex marriage (compare [Matthew 5:28](#)). Our purpose as sexual beings is fulfilled not when we do whatever we want but when we learn to submit our desires to the will of the one who made us.

What Do You Think?

How might Paul respond to various "gay rights" arguments today?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Responses similar to those in today's text
- Responses in addition to those in the text

B. Corrupt Minds ([vv. 28-32](#))

28. Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done.

This third *God gave them over* reemphasizes the correlation between rejection of God and the punishment that results from the life that the rebellious choose. *Depraved* translates a word meaning "tested and found inadequate." The phrase *ought not to be done* translates an expression meaning "not fit or suitable." If we find God as failing the fitting-and-suitable test, then God lets us discover the resulting life that is itself unfitting and unsuitable.

29a. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity.

Paul now begins a list of evils that characterize a life that rejects God. Such attitudes and behaviors move life far from the justice that the Creator intends and humans should long for.

There are several such "vice lists" in the New Testament, and this one is the longest. *Every kind of wickedness* leads the list, signifying the absence of justice. *Evil* is an umbrella term that addresses all kinds of wrongdoing. Paul equates *greed* with idolatry in [Colossians 3:5](#). The word translated *depravity* is also translated *malice* in [1 Corinthians 5:8](#).

29b. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips,

The focus here is more specifically on ways that humans refuse to live well with each other. *Envy* is hostility toward others for what they have or are (compare [1 Peter 2:1](#)). *Murder* is, of course, the outright destruction of others. *Strife* points to dividing up into mutually hostile groups; the same word in the original language can be translated “dissension” (as it is in [Romans 13:13](#)), “quarrels/quarreling” ([1 Corinthians 1:11](#); [3:3](#)), and “rivalry” ([Philippians 1:15](#)). *Deceit* is willful dishonesty (also translated “trickery/trying to trick” in [2 Corinthians 12:16](#); [1 Thessalonians 2:3](#)). *Malice* desires bad things to happen to others. The inclusion of *gossips* (those who engage in rumormongering) puts that sin in its true light. Ultimately, this can be no less destructive than other sins listed here (compare [2 Corinthians 12:20](#)).

30. slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents;

The catalog of social sins continues. *Slanderers* are those who speak ill of others (again, compare [2 Corinthians 12:20](#)); the Bible also calls such folks “malicious talkers” (see [1 Timothy 3:11](#), although a different word is being translated there). Those who hate their fellow humans, who bear God’s image, thereby also are *God-haters* ([1 John 4:20](#)).

Such behaviors reflect an inflated view of oneself, the desire to rule one’s own life as supreme monarch. So Paul includes the *insolent* (having contempt for others because of a high view of self), the *arrogant*, and the *boastful* in the list. Such people use their divinely given creative capacity to find new *ways of doing evil*. They reject all authority outside themselves, even to the point that *they disobey their parents* (compare [2 Timothy 3:2](#)).

31. they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy.

In the original language, all the terms in this verse begin with the *a* sound. Each term expresses a negative, the lack of something that true justice and goodness demand. Without acknowledgement of the Creator, *understanding* of what is most important is lost. This leads people to have *no fidelity* (faithfulness). Such hardened people also have *no love*. *Mercy* is thwarted when God, the source of mercy, is rejected.

What Do You Think?

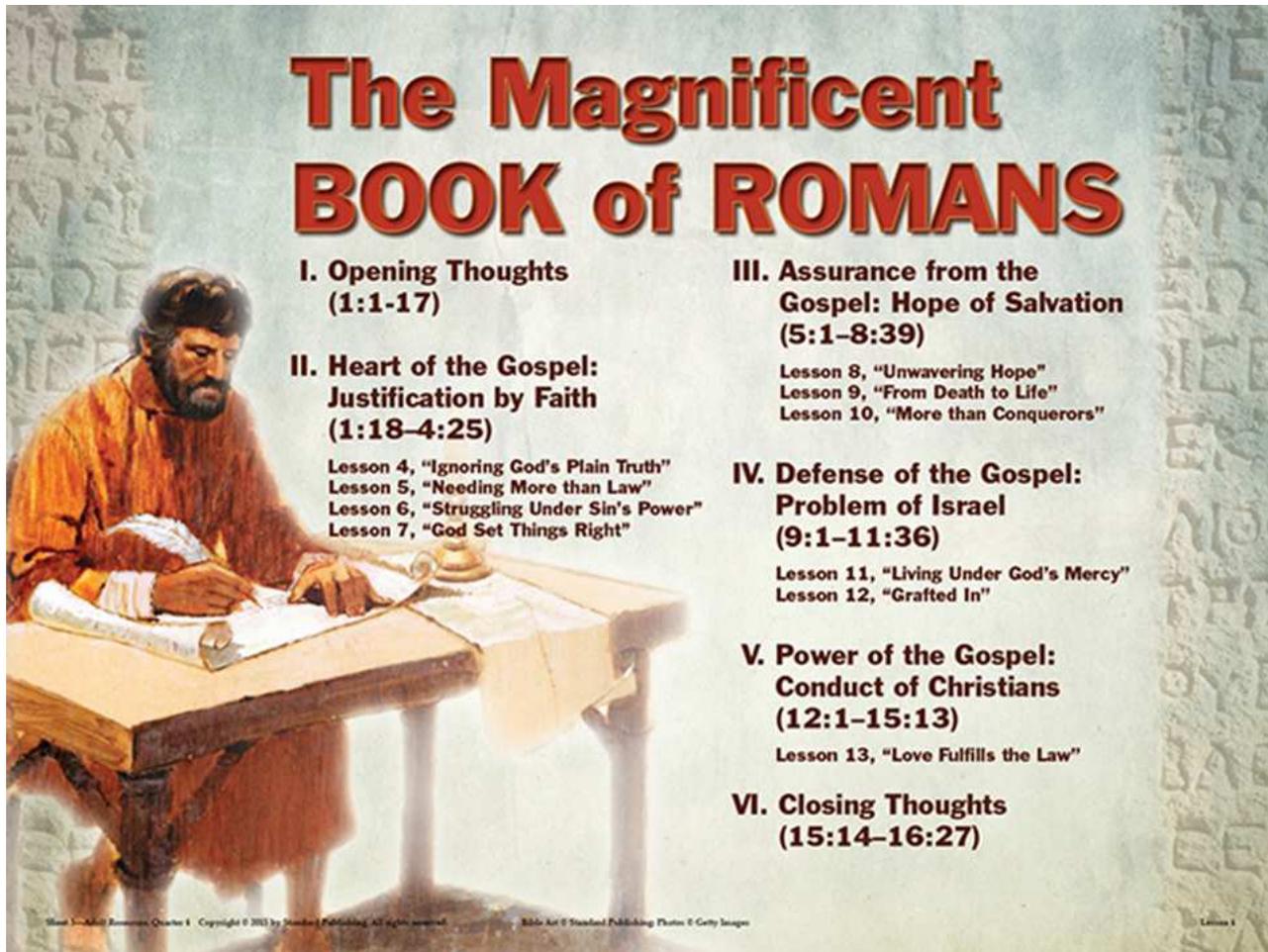
What can we include in a list of characteristics of a life in submission to God, in contrast with what Paul lists for the life in rebellion against God?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- Regarding attitudes
- Regarding actions
- Regarding values
- Regarding goals
- Other

32. 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.

To conclude, Paul reasserts that knowledge of God is available to all. To know that there is a Creator is to know that we are responsible to him, that he indeed judges all people. Those who are guilty of the attitudes and actions listed *deserve death* because they know better. And how much worse it is when we deliberately and by example lead others to do the same! See [Luke 17:1, 2](#).



Visual for Lesson 4. Keep this visual posted for the remainder of the quarter to give your learners a bird's-eye view of the book of Romans.

Conclusion

A. Pointing Fingers

Paul described the worst of pagan society as his fellow Jews were accustomed to seeing it. But Paul's description is also very close to the way Israel's prophets had condemned Israel for similar denial of God. As noted in last week's lesson, one finger that points at others leaves the rest of the fingers pointing back at ourselves.

In the end, none can condemn others without condemning oneself. Realizing that, we can do nothing except to receive and rely on the mercy of God, who invites us back to him by his grace.

B. Prayer

God our Creator, when we look at creation, may we always see your hand behind it. When we look at Jesus Christ, may we ever see in him the new creation you have revealed. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Right attitudes and actions begin with
acknowledging the Creator.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Into the Lesson

Display pictures of beautiful nature scenery (mountains, oceans, flowers, etc.) and play a recording of nature (singing birds, babbling brook, etc.). Ask learners to offer thoughts about the nature of God from these, pretending they do not know anything about him except what they see in the pictures and hear in the recording. Jot responses on the board. Discuss how creation provides evidence for the existence of a Creator.

Say, “In today’s text, Paul states that although God cannot be seen, he has revealed himself to all people through creation. This is called ‘general revelation,’ as compared with the ‘special revelation’ of the Bible. Let’s see what general revelation should result in and how it is resisted.”

Into the Word

Say, “In today’s text, Paul constructs an argument that will form a basis for the lessons to follow this one. Therefore, we should take great care in understanding [Romans 1:18-32](#).”

Read [Romans 1:18-20](#) aloud, then pose the questions below. The bracketed statements serve as your response key. *Option:* Reproduce the questions on handouts for learners to consider in small groups; do not include the bracketed statements.

1. If the words *godlessness* and *wickedness* in [verse 18](#) were flipped to their positive counterparts *godliness* and *righteousness*, which three other words would need to change as well? What would they change to? [The words *wrath*, *against*, and *suppress* would need to change to *love*, *toward*, and *speak*, respectively, or something similar.]

2. Why are *godlessness* (rebellion against God) and *wickedness* (disregard for others) the opposite of the two commandments in [Matthew 22:36-40](#)? [Since those two establish love for God and love for others to be primary, then rebelling against God and disregarding people would be their violations.]

3. Why can no one use a defense of “I never had a Bible, so I didn’t know God’s will”? [Creation itself provides enough information so that no one can rightfully claim ignorance of him; see also [Romans 2:14, 15](#).]

Read [Romans 1:21-23](#) aloud. Form groups to discuss these questions (on handouts): 1. How do people engage in “futile” thinking and end up with “darkened” hearts? 2. How does the answer to question 1 relate to the world’s tendency to glorify almost anyone/anything instead of God?

Use the commentary to correct misconceptions when groups present their conclusions in the ensuing whole-class discussion. Then say, “Paul next sketches consequences of failure to glorify God.” Read these three sections: [1:24, 25](#) / [1:26, 27](#) / [1:28-32](#). Pause for reactions after each is read. Draw attention to the phrase *God gave them over* in each case. Lead the class in seeing how that phrase relates to the rest of the segment.

Summarize: “Paul’s argument is simple and devastating: the very fact that the world exists means that we owe ourselves to the Creator. When we accept a substitute, the result is all the bad things we see in our text and in the world today.”

Option. Enhance discussion of [Romans 1:28](#) with the “The Lies People Tell Themselves” activity from the reproducible page, which you can download. This can be a whole-class exercise.

Into Life

Brainstorm ways to reject the lies that lead to the sinful behaviors of [Romans 1:24-32](#). Then ask, “Which way does it work: Do we help someone see the futility of such behaviors so he or she might turn to God, or do we help someone turn to God so he or she will see the futility of such behaviors?”

Option. Distribute copies of the “Glorify God” activity from the reproducible page. This can be a take-home exercise, but it is better to allow a few minutes for in-class completion.