What is Behind Unbelief?
Romans 1:18-23

Today is Mother’s Day. Believe it or not, when you signed up to be a mom – through natural birth, adoption, foster care, helping out another, whatever – you took on one of the significant responsibilities in the whole Universe. You are going to help train that little one to be a functioning, caring, good, moral, hard-working, over-coming, generous, self-controlled, confident human being who learns to love God, submit to His ways, benefit culture, interact well with others, make wise decisions, and seek the long term best for others. Moms you are more than important! As history has shown us, raising kids is not something that will happen by itself (just look at the statistics) nor can institutions effectively do that by themselves (currently schools are rightly saying that they can’t do everything). Then we factor in the uniqueness of each child, so there is no “12 step program” that will perfectly produce the mature human that is desired. There are common values to be learned, skills to be taught, abilities to be mastered and communication skills to acquire. But the uniqueness of each person’s mind, natural abilities, situation in life, temperament and a hundred other influences make the task of being a mom incredibly challenging in the best of circumstances.

But this current world is not the best of circumstances. We live in a broken world where things don’t always go right and negative consequences come out of even the best actions. We live in a broken culture which often encourages actions and attitudes that God disapproves of and will bring greater problems in the future. We live in a world with a genuine spiritual enemy far stronger than we are naturally. That unseen enemy wants to corrupt all godly mothering. No wonder being a mother is one of the most difficult, tiring and taxing jobs in the whole Universe. And if that were all not hard enough, all moms have their own inner struggle with sin, selfishness & corruption to deal with! Don’t worry Moms – we are not focusing at all on the deficiencies of human moms this morning.

Instead we want to ALL focus on better understanding our human nature – the brokenness we have inside us – the tendencies we lean towards – the temptations that ensnare us – the process that corrupts us. We want to better understand SIN, its slavery, corruption, & foolishness. The bad results that come from it and the negative challenge it brings to all areas of life. A couple weeks ago, we started a 2 month series on the first 3 chapters of the book of Romans. Last week we finished the first 17 verses of chapter 1 talking about the good news of Jesus in regards to sin and now continue in v 18. READ Romans 1:18-23.

PROPOSITION: God never condemns without just cause, while humans reject the truth they have been given.

I. People act wickedly, ignore God and suppress of God’s truth Romans 1:18

A. V 18 is directly connected to Romans 1:17.
Why did we start reading in v 18? Because that seems natural in our English Bibles as many Bibles have a new heading or natural paragraph break there. I didn’t find an outline of the book of Romans that didn’t start a new section at v 18. And virtually every Bible commentary seems to note that v 17 is the end of the introductory comments and v 18 which starts a new section that goes through the end of chapter 3. Even in these seeming clear cases, it is important to go back to the verse or verses before this to see what connections are there.

READ v 17-18. Notice the word “revealed” is repeated. In v 17 God reveals His righteousness. Last week we saw that the gospel is the good news about Jesus who died on the cross to pay the penalty of our wrongs and rose from the dead to prove it all. In this message of GOOD NEWS, we see God OFFERS His righteousness to any person who puts their trust and faith in Jesus. God then considers us righteous simply by our faith, even though every one of us falls short of God’s perfect standard. So any talk of sin in humans is in the context of divine transformation that is available to everyone. Now that is good news! V 18 God also reveals His wrath against godlessness, wickedness and the suppression of His truth. READ v 18.

B. Americans struggle with the idea of God’s wrath
Currently Americans really, really struggle with the idea of God’s wrath and judgment against sin – unless someone has personally hurt them very badly and appears to be getting away with it. Our culture pictures wrath as an outburst of impulsive, uncontrolled, anger. There are two basic words in the Greek language used to express anger. From thumos we get our words thermometer and thermos. Thumos is red-hot anger—the kind that overcomes people when they lose control and smack someone on the nose. It is impulsive and passionate. That is not the word used in our text. “The wrath of God” does not picture a Deity who “flies off the handle” and indiscriminately thumps anybody who happens to be at hand. The word here is orgé, which signifies a settled and abiding condition. It is controlled. God’s wrath is not directed against goodness, but against “all the godlessness and wickedness of people.” God’s wrath is God’s opposition to evil and His stand for justice & right. Though God’s wrath is not “bad temper”, it is a very serious action because wrong will be avenged, stopped, and paid for. The revelation of the wrath of God is an expression of God’s personal righteousness and its opposition to sin & wickedness.

C. How is it revealed?
The object of God’s wrath is “godlessness” and “wickedness”. Godlessness is a lack of reverence for God and all He does for us. It is not just neglect but also a form of rebellion. Your moms probably told you sometime “get rid of that attitude”. While they loved us, sacrificed for us, and did a lot for us, there was a point at which our ungratefulness, disrespect, and ignoring their wishes led them to stand firmly against us. And rightfully so, because we were damaging the family, others and ourselves! More is written on this bad attitude in vv. 19-27. Wickedness is unrighteousness. It is disobedience. Wickedness causes hurt and violates others. Failure to give God
recognition & cooperation for all He provides us (godlessness) inevitably results in failure to treat people, created by God in His image, the right way (wickedness). You’ll see many examples of this wickedness listed in vv. 28-32. **READ v 18.**

*How is the wrath of God being revealed today?* It is seen in the negative results that come from godlessness and wickedness. History clearly shows this time and time again. The wrath of God that is revealed today is God handing people over to the natural outworking of their sinful behavior in the present time. This is to graciously give us a chance to ‘**wake up**’ and avoid the final judgement which surely must come from a just, holy and righteous God.

D. People suppress the truth by what they want to do

**READ v 18.** Those people who don’t honor God for all He has done for us as we should and those who do what they want instead of what God says will help the world truly flourish – which is all of us at some point – we suppress the God’s truth. This suppression of the truth is not passive. It carries the idea of holding something down. People knew the truth about God, but they did not allow this truth to work in their lives or their cultures. We suppressed God’s truth by explaining it away, hiding it, rationalizing it, mocking & laughing at God’s truth so we can continue doing what we want, when we want and how we want. Many of you will have friends who complain bitterly about how unfair, mean & unreasonable their parents are, but when you go to visit their parents you see another very positive side that your friends never mentioned – on purpose. They were suppressing the truth of the positive benefits they were receiving.

So when we look at “unbelief” of God or His ways around us, it is not just an absence of knowledge. The disobedience God is most concerned about doesn’t deal with what I don’t know, but what I do know and repressed. God never disciplines, resists, or condemns without just cause.

II. Clear messages of God are ignored

**Romans 1:19-20**

**READ v 18-20.** It is clearly stated here that God **clearly** gives some clear messages about Himself to everyone in this world, but those messages are **routinely ignored**. If that is true for Almighty God, no wonder being a mom is so hard! No one will have an excuse for their lack of trust in God, their wrong actions against others or their failure to hold God’s truths.

A. There is revelation of God in the creation around us (Natural revelation)

**READ v 20.** God has clearly revealed Himself through creation – that is through nature and the physical Universe around us. *(That is represented each by the stain glass message on this side).* The creation around us shows us something about the Creator who made it. Life, the universe, and our human thinking could not have happened by chance. We call this revelation of God, “**natural revelation**”, because we see these clear truths of God in nature. We see evidences of those invisible qualities that make God, God.
Several are mentioned here — God's eternal power and His divine nature. God's divine nature refers to those attributes that make God, God. Because God is spirit and cannot be seen like physical beings, His attributes are clearly seen in what God has made. God has given us clear proof that there is a God – all this around us could not happen by just time and chance. How is there something out of nothing? How is there life out of non-life? And how could that which separates humans from animals come about? There is design behind this universe that shows an intelligent designer – we would not have math and science without that. There is beauty, transcendence and love that cannot just come from the survival of the fittest. The more we learn of the incredible size of the Universe and the complexity of even the simplest single living cell, the clearer it is how great a difference there is between our lack of power & God's eternal power, between our faulty understanding and God's all-knowing wisdom, between our finite limitations and God's infiniteness. Natural revelation clearly shows us the infinite distance between us (creatures) and him (the Creator). The last thing we want to do is rely on our own understanding. Instead we want to follow and learn from the Lord God Almighty – maker of heaven and earth.

B. God has made that knowledge clear TO ALL
But that is not what we do even though this knowledge of God from nature is made clear to everyone. READ v 19. Something that is "plain to them" means it is very clear, straightforward and easy to understand. God purposely made it plain for all. We don't have to "find God" – we don't have to go on a quest for God – we simply need to slow down, observe, and listen. God's testimony is constant. Despite all the attempts of modern day cultural leaders to say all that is around us just happened by time and chance, the foundational nagging questions never go away – they are simply ignored or hidden or fancifully explained away. How did all this something come from nothing without an eternal Creator? How could life come from non-life without a powerful Creator? And how could humans have the abilities we have in thinking without a designer? How did championing selfless, sacrificial love come from a survival of the fittest environment? Since the creation of the world God's nature has been clearly seen; it is to be understood through what He has made; and this is the reason humanity is without excuse for its failure to honor God as God.

C. Natural revelation is not exhaustive
While natural revelation — what we can know about God from what He has created — is very clear, it is not exhaustive. That is, we can't know all the attributes of God from the design in nature around us nor can we know what will happen in the future from viewing the immensity of the Universe nor can we know that we can have forgiveness of sins & right standing with God through faith in Jesus by observing the night sky, a beautiful sunset or studying the intricate parts of any cell in our body. Natural revelation is clear, but it is not complete. IT IS sufficient to take away any excuse from someone claiming they didn't know there is a God or that He is powerful or that we are inferior to Him in so many ways so we should follow Him.
D. No one can honestly claim any excuse

**READ v 20.** The conclusion of this is that if people choose to go their own way instead of God’s those “people are without excuse”. Moms can identify with this when they hear the excuses of why their kids disobey! We may not know everything needed for life and godliness through Natural Revelation, but clearly we humans naturally aren’t responding rightly to the clearest of statements broadcast all the time from life, human thinking and the physical universe. There is a God, He is powerful, He creates, He has attributes no other living being has. There is a huge “gap” between us, so we humans need to follow that designer & creator rather than our own desires. If we don’t we can’t complain about the consequences of ignoring or suppressing these truths about God. The truth is, it takes a concerted act of the will to deny that a vastly powerful God made and sustains the Creation. In these cases, condemnation is not based on their rejecting Jesus Christ whom they have never heard of, but on their sinning against the light they have always had.

Does anyone have an excuse for not believing in God? The Bible answers an emphatic no. God has revealed his existence (or divine nature) in his creation. The fact that general revelation is not effective in convincing humans does not mean it is not true. The argument that design implies a designer is not an argument people can’t accept; it is an argument people refuse to accept. Later in this book of Romans, Paul tells us that the Jewish people received clearer revelation of God through the Law of Moses. Here we are only speaking about the knowledge of God available to all people through the physical world around us. Human history began with mankind knowing God. Human history is not the story of a beast that worshiped idols, and then evolved into a man worshiping one God.

**III. People pervert the truth they do know**

“Unbelief” suppresses God’s truth. **Unbelief also perverts the truth we do know.** Again with our moms, how often did we try to turn our mom’s words around so we did the opposite of what she said, but tried to convince ourselves we were doing what she said? We knew it wasn’t because we didn’t understand – we didn’t want to do what our moms asked at that time, so we twisted or perverted the truth. When I look at the challenges I gave my mom, and I was considered a half-way decent kid, no wonder it is so hard to be a mom!

A. They ignore God and His gifts

**READ v 21.** It is a real problem for us, our loved ones and society, when we ignore God, His gifts and all He has done & is doing for us. We don’t glorify God or give thanks to Him. Some try to turn that around and say God must be narcissistic & ego-driven to need praise and worship from His people. That is actually trying to make ourselves above God and His truth. We have countless examples around us of the destruction that comes when we won’t admit that we don’t know where we are going & we need to listen to someone else. Or the destruction that comes when we insist on going our own way even though warned only to learn those strong desires inside us were harmful in the long run. We aren’t going to live wisely if we don’t see God...
rightly. We aren’t going to love others, if we don’t appreciate the love shown to us. We aren’t going to stand strong for the long term good, if we don’t see how some of our current strong desires are the opposite of God’s truth. Our weekly gathering to worship, praise and learn more of God and His word are not to build up some self-esteem in God. We need this reminder to live rightly. It is not right when we continually use & rely on God’s gifts, but refuse to recognize, honor and listen to the gift giver. Ingratitude may seem like a small thing at the moment, but it reveals a dangerous self-centeredness.

B. They elevate “self” above all, which corrupts mind & heart  Ps 106:20; Isa 44:9–20
The result is an empty mind & darkened heart. READ v 21-22. When we elevate our feelings above God’s word; When we elevate our thoughts above God’s truth; When we elevate our puny selves above the Creator & Sustainer of this Universe then all the special God-given unique human abilities in us become corrupted. Our thinking becomes futile, our hearts grow harder, our wisdom turns to foolishness. We start trying to live in a self-centered universe instead of the God-centered universe. And that is a disaster which we see in the daily headlines! We are not the master of everything. We need the true God! We need His blessings, we need His wisdom, we need His correction, we need His direction, we need His forgiveness, we need His righteousness, we need Him to bring us to paradise, we need Him to give us a new, lasting body, we need Him to strengthen relationships, we need His love. We need God!

C. They replace God with inferior objects of worship
Finally, for today, people have replaced the Almighty, Holy, & Loving God with inferior objects of worship. READ v 22-23. We humans are religious people and if we refuse to let God have His rightful place as Lord of our lives, we will put something inferior there. We will devote ourselves to something that will not lead to an abundant, meaningful, lasting, joy-filled, eternal life. The true God is ruled out & some counterfeit is put in its place which can not do what God can as we read together earlier in our service in Isaiah 44:9-20. They made physical idols out of the things God created and honoring what He created in His place. Our idols are there because we want what we want, rather than surrendering to the One True God who knows far more than we do. We continue to make idols in our day out of created things, but now our idols don’t sit on a self – unless it is the TV! Our American idols are having more money, more possessions, an easier life, being more recognized, success, career, and leisure.

We started with moms, let’s end with moms. Mother’s Day is set aside to encourage each of us to remember, thank and honor our moms whether they are alive or have died. Whether they nurtured us or just gave us life. Whether we are close to them or our currently estranged. It is actually more important for the long run that each of us thank or honor our own moms, known or unknown, than that moms all receive something today. We need to gratefully see something they gave us. It is even more true about honoring & thanking God as the Creator of this Universe & Sustainer of life! We need to put the true God first in our lives for real life!