

Session 4

LGBTQ+ & THE BIBLE



Romans 1:18-2:2—So God Gave Them Over to Reprobate Minds



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LGBTQ+ AND THE BIBLE

Session 4: Romans 1:18–2:2 — So God Gave Them Over to Reprobate Minds

Understanding Paul's Argument About Idolatry, Human Sin, and Religious Judgment

Primary Scripture: Romans 1:18–2:2

Additional Scriptures for Study: Exodus 32:1–35; 1 Corinthians 11:13–16; Romans 2:17–29; Romans 3:9–24; Galatians 3:26–29

INTRODUCTION: ONE OF THE MOST MISUNDERSTOOD PASSAGES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Romans 1:18–32 is frequently presented as one of the clearest New Testament condemnations of homosexuality. In particular, verses 26 and 27 are often quoted as though Paul were directly addressing gay and lesbian people and declaring their sexual orientation contrary to God's design.

For many Christians, these verses appear to settle the question. Paul speaks about women and men exchanging sexual practices described as natural for those he describes as contrary to nature. He associates these behaviors with shameful desires and describes people being given over to the consequences of their choices.

However, a careful reading reveals that Paul's argument is considerably more complex than these isolated verses suggest.

Romans 1 is not an independent discussion about sexual orientation. It belongs to a much larger argument concerning idolatry, humanity's rejection of God, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, and the danger of religious self-righteousness.

Paul is building a case that continues directly into Romans 2. His argument deliberately draws the reader toward a judgment about the behavior of others before confronting the person making that judgment.

When Romans 1 is separated from Romans 2, the central force of Paul's argument can easily be missed.

This session will examine the passage in its literary and historical context, identify the people and behaviors Paul describes, consider the meaning of the Greek terminology, and explore why his comparison with cultural expectations in 1 Corinthians 11 is important.

Our goal is to understand what Paul was actually addressing rather than assume that his words were written in response to modern questions about sexual orientation and loving same-sex relationships.

1. WHO WAS PAUL WRITING TO?

Before examining Romans 1, we need to understand the people who first received Paul's letter.

Paul wrote to believers in Rome, a community that included both Jewish and Gentile followers of Jesus. These believers lived within a society shaped by Roman culture, while Jewish religious traditions and the Law of Moses remained important influences upon their understanding of God.

The relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers was a major concern in the early Church. Jewish Christians inherited centuries of covenant history, religious customs, and identification as God's chosen people. Gentile Christians, by contrast, came from nations that had not lived under the Mosaic covenant.

This created questions about belonging, religious identity, and the requirements for becoming part of God's people.

Were Gentile believers required to adopt Jewish customs and religious observances? Did Jewish believers occupy a superior spiritual position because they possessed the Law? Could Gentiles be accepted fully through faith in Jesus Christ without first becoming Jewish?

These questions appear throughout Paul's writings and are especially important in Romans.

Paul's purpose is not simply to provide a list of individual sins. He is explaining the human need for God's grace and demonstrating that neither Jewish heritage nor possession of the Law gives anyone grounds for spiritual superiority.

Understanding this purpose changes the way we read the opening chapters of the letter.

2. ROMANS MUST BE READ AS A CONTINUOUS ARGUMENT

One of the most common mistakes in biblical interpretation is treating individual verses as though they were written independently of the surrounding discussion.

The chapters and verse numbers in our modern Bibles were added long after the biblical books were written. They help us locate passages, but they can also encourage us to separate statements that were originally part of a continuous argument.

This is particularly important in Romans 1 and 2.

Paul begins by describing humanity's rejection of God and the consequences of idolatry. He then develops a lengthy description of moral corruption, including greed, hatred, envy, deception, arrogance, and the absence of mercy.

But Paul does not end his argument there.

At the beginning of Romans 2, he turns directly toward the person who has been judging the people described in the preceding chapter.

The transition is essential. Paul has not merely been inviting his readers to identify the wickedness of others. He has been preparing to confront their own self-righteousness.

If we stop reading at Romans 1:32, we miss the moment when Paul turns the argument toward the reader.

To understand what Paul is teaching, we must follow the argument through Romans 2 and recognize the larger conclusion he develops in Romans 3.

3. PAUL BEGINS WITH THE REJECTION OF GOD

Read Romans 1:18–23

Paul begins by describing people who have knowledge of God but refuse to honor Him.

He explains that God's power and divine nature are evident through creation. Nevertheless, the people he describes reject the truth available to them and turn instead toward false understandings of God.

Paul's language is important because he is not describing people who simply lack religious information.

He portrays people who possess knowledge of God yet refuse to worship Him or give Him thanks.

Their rejection leads to distorted thinking and the creation of idols. Rather than worshiping the living God, they turn toward images representing human beings, birds, animals, and reptiles.

The central wrongdoing in these verses is idolatry.

Paul describes a deliberate exchange in which the worship owed to the Creator is transferred to created things.

This exchange becomes the foundation for everything that follows. The behaviors described later in the chapter are presented within Paul's discussion of the consequences of rejecting God and embracing idolatrous worship.

That context must remain central when interpreting verses 26 and 27.

4. THE CONNECTION TO ISRAEL'S HISTORY

Read Exodus 32:1–35

Paul's description of people who know God but turn toward idols recalls a familiar pattern in the history of Israel.

One of the clearest examples is the incident of the golden calf in Exodus 32.

The Israelites had experienced God's deliverance from Egypt. They had witnessed extraordinary demonstrations of divine power and had entered into a covenant relationship with the Lord.

Yet while Moses was on Mount Sinai, the people demanded that Aaron make gods to lead them.

Aaron collected gold from the people and fashioned an image of a calf. The people then associated that image with the divine power that had brought them out of Egypt.

The significance of this event is that Israel was not simply a nation without knowledge of God. These were people who had experienced God's deliverance and nevertheless turned toward an image of a created thing.

Paul's description in Romans 1 contains a recognizable parallel. People who know of God's power and glory exchange the worship of the Creator for images resembling created beings.

The comparison is especially relevant because Romans addresses the spiritual status of Jews and Gentiles. Israel's own history demonstrates that possessing divine revelation does not automatically prevent idolatry or guarantee faithfulness.

Those who regard themselves as spiritually privileged must remember that knowledge of God carries responsibility rather than providing immunity from judgment.

5. THE EXCHANGE OF TRUTH FOR A LIE

Read Romans 1:24–25

Paul continues by explaining that the rejection of God produces consequences.

The people he describes exchange the truth about God for a lie, worshiping and serving created things rather than the Creator.

This is the central exchange in Paul's argument.

The problem begins with worship. Human beings turn away from the God who created them and give their devotion to something within creation.

Paul then describes God allowing them to experience the consequences of their chosen direction.

This is the meaning of the repeated statement that God gave them over or abandoned them to their desires.

God does not force people into idolatry. Rather, Paul portrays God permitting people to pursue the path they have chosen, even when that path leads toward destructive behavior.

The consequences of idolatry extend beyond religious worship. They affect the way people treat their bodies, understand relationships, and behave toward others.

Paul is describing a pattern in which distorted worship contributes to distorted conduct.

The behaviors mentioned in the following verses must therefore be understood within this larger discussion of idolatry and the rejection of God.

6. WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT GOD “GAVE THEM OVER”?

The expression that God gave people over appears repeatedly in Romans 1.

Paul uses it to describe the consequences of people rejecting God and choosing their own way.

This does not mean that God creates the desires or actions being described. The emphasis is upon people being permitted to follow the direction they have already chosen.

Throughout Scripture, human beings are presented as responsible for their decisions. God calls people toward righteousness, but they may reject that calling and pursue alternatives.

In Romans 1, Paul describes the consequences of such rejection.

The phrase has sometimes been associated with the language of a *reprobate mind*, particularly through older English translations of Romans 1:28. The underlying idea is that people who refuse to acknowledge God are left to pursue distorted ways of thinking and behaving.

This is not a description of a person's sexual orientation as an innate characteristic.

It is a description of moral and spiritual choices made within a larger pattern of rejecting God and embracing idolatry.

That distinction matters because the passage is frequently applied to LGBTQ+ people without first establishing that the circumstances Paul describes correspond to their lives.

A Christian who loves God, worships Christ, and seeks to follow the Holy Spirit cannot simply be assumed to fit Paul's description of people who knowingly reject the Creator in favor of idols.

7. IDOLATRY AND SEXUAL PRACTICES IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Read Romans 1:26–27

Paul's discussion moves from idolatry to sexual behavior that he describes as dishonorable and contrary to nature.

The ancient religious world included fertility cults and other forms of worship in which sexuality, fertility, and the powers of nature were closely associated with religious belief.

Israel's history records repeated encounters with the worship of Canaanite deities, including Baal and Ashtoreth. Biblical writers condemned the adoption of pagan worship practices and the abandonment of Israel's covenant relationship with God.

Some ancient religious environments also included sexual practices associated with ritual activity, prostitution, or displays of power and excess. The precise forms of those practices varied across cultures and periods.

The connection your study draws is between Paul's description of idolatry and the sexual conduct that follows in his argument.

Paul does not begin with a discussion of committed relationships between people of the same sex. He begins with the rejection of God, the worship of created things, and the consequences of that exchange.

It is therefore important to resist the temptation to remove the sexual language from the religious and moral setting Paul has established.

Romans 1:26–27 must be interpreted as part of his argument about idolatry, not as though it were an independent essay defining modern homosexuality.

8. THE PEOPLE PAUL DESCRIBES HAVE REJECTED GOD

One of the most important observations in Romans 1 is how specifically Paul describes the people under discussion.

He identifies them as people who possess knowledge of God but refuse to honor Him.

They reject the truth, exchange worship of the Creator for worship of created things, and pursue desires that Paul associates with their abandonment of God.

These details are not incidental. They establish the circumstances surrounding the conduct Paul condemns.

Yet when Romans 1:26–27 is used against LGBTQ+ Christians, those details are often overlooked.

A gay or lesbian Christian who worships Jesus, studies Scripture, participates in Christian community, and seeks to live under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is not accurately described simply by pointing to Paul's account of people who reject God and embrace idolatry.

The text does not establish that same-sex attraction itself results from a conscious decision to abandon God.

Nor does it describe a loving same-sex relationship between people seeking to honor Christ.

Before applying Paul's words to contemporary believers, we must ask whether the people and circumstances he describes actually correspond to those being judged.

That is a basic requirement of responsible biblical interpretation.

9. PAUL'S LIST OF WICKEDNESS IS MUCH BROADER THAN SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

Read Romans 1:28–32

After discussing sexual conduct, Paul continues with a lengthy description of moral corruption.

He identifies greed, hatred, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, gossip, arrogance, disobedience, unfaithfulness, and the absence of mercy.

This list is important because it demonstrates that Paul's argument is not narrowly focused upon sexuality.

He is describing the broader consequences of rejecting God and pursuing a life disconnected from righteousness.

The behaviors he names affect relationships, communities, and the treatment of other people. They include attitudes and actions that can be found among people of every sexual orientation and religious background.

Paul also emphasizes that those involved know the seriousness of their wrongdoing yet continue to practice it and encourage others to do likewise.

This statement prepares the way for the next stage of his argument.

The reference to knowledge of divine judgment becomes especially significant when we remember that Jewish believers possessed the Law and regarded themselves as people who knew God's standards.

Paul is moving toward a confrontation with those who believe their knowledge of the Law places them in a position to condemn others.

10. PAUL IS ABOUT TO TURN THE TABLES

The progression of Romans 1 creates an opportunity for the reader to agree with Paul's condemnation of wickedness.

A Jewish reader familiar with the Law could readily recognize the evils of idolatry and the moral failures Paul describes.

Such a reader might also assume that Paul's discussion is primarily concerned with the sins of Gentiles who had not received the covenant revelation given to Israel.

But Paul is preparing to challenge that assumption.

The person who believes he possesses superior religious knowledge is about to discover that knowledge does not provide exemption from God's judgment.

Paul's argument depends upon this transition.

He begins with wrongdoing that his audience can recognize and condemn, then exposes the danger of assuming that those who condemn others are themselves righteous.

This is why Romans 2:1 is indispensable to understanding Romans 1.

The argument has not reached its conclusion until Paul addresses the person who has been judging everyone else.

11. ROMANS 2:1 CHANGES THE DIRECTION OF THE ARGUMENT

Read Romans 2:1–2

At the beginning of Romans 2, Paul turns directly toward the person who judges others.

He declares that those who condemn the wrongdoing of others have no excuse when they themselves practice the same kinds of things.

The language deliberately confronts religious self-righteousness.

Paul has described idolatry, corruption, and wickedness in terms that invite moral judgment. Now he warns that the person making that judgment may be guilty of the very conduct being condemned.

This becomes particularly significant within the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers.

Jewish readers possessed the Law and could regard Gentiles as spiritually inferior because they had not received the same covenant revelation. Yet Israel's own history included idolatry, disobedience, injustice, and repeated violations of God's commands.

Paul's argument exposes the inconsistency of condemning others while failing to recognize one's own wrongdoing.

The possession of religious knowledge does not make a person righteous.

Neither does belonging to a particular religious community provide grounds for treating others as spiritually inferior.

The central force of Paul's argument is therefore directed against the assumption that one group may confidently condemn another while overlooking its own need for God's grace.

12. THE DANGER OF RELIGIOUS SUPERIORITY

The relationship between Romans 1 and Romans 2 reveals a recurring problem within religious communities.

People who possess knowledge of Scripture can begin to assume that their understanding gives them the right to judge those who appear different from themselves.

They may become skilled at identifying the sins of others while remaining unwilling to examine their own conduct.

Paul directly challenges that attitude.

The Jewish people had received the Law and possessed a unique covenant history. Yet that privilege did not mean they were incapable of committing the same kinds of sins they condemned among the Gentiles.

In the same way, Christians today can possess extensive biblical knowledge while failing to demonstrate the humility, compassion, and righteousness Scripture requires.

This is especially relevant when Romans 1 is used to condemn LGBTQ+ people.

A reader may focus intensely upon verses 26 and 27 while passing quickly over Paul's condemnation of greed, gossip, arrogance, dishonesty, and the absence of mercy.

The person who quotes Romans 1 to judge another must also hear Paul's warning in Romans 2.

The argument does not permit us to place ourselves safely outside the problem while identifying others as the objects of God's judgment.

13. WHAT WAS PAUL ACTUALLY CONDEMNING?

Having followed the larger argument, we can now return to the sexual language of Romans 1:26–27.

Paul describes sexual behavior within a discussion of people who reject God, embrace idolatry, and pursue desires associated with that rejection.

His language emphasizes exchange, desire, dishonor, and conduct he describes as contrary to nature.

These features belong to the circumstances he is discussing.

The passage does not describe two Christians who have formed a committed same-sex relationship and are seeking to live faithfully before God.

It does not discuss sexual orientation as a persistent dimension of human experience.

Nor does it establish that gay and lesbian people have rejected God simply because they experience same-sex attraction.

The distinction is essential.

The conduct Paul describes must be evaluated within the actual framework of his argument rather than treated as an automatic description of every same-sex relationship.

To understand that framework more fully, we also need to examine the language Paul uses when describing behavior as natural or shameful.

14. WHAT DOES PAUL MEAN BY “NATURAL”?

One of the most frequently quoted expressions in Romans 1 concerns behavior described as natural or contrary to nature.

The Greek word associated with this discussion is *physis* (φύσις), meaning nature.

In ancient Greek usage, the concept of nature could refer to the inherent character of something, the order of the world, or what was commonly understood to be appropriate according to prevailing expectations.

The idea also had an important place within Greek philosophical discussions, including traditions that influenced the intellectual environment of the first century.

Consequently, the language of nature must be interpreted within the context in which Paul uses it.

Modern readers often assume that *natural* must refer exclusively to an unchanging biological or moral law.

But ancient writers could also appeal to nature when discussing conduct that aligned with recognized cultural expectations.

Paul's own writings provide an important example.

In 1 Corinthians 11, he uses the language of nature while discussing expectations concerning men's and women's hair and appearance.

Examining that passage helps us understand why the word cannot simply be removed from its cultural setting.

15. PAUL'S USE OF "NATURE" IN 1 CORINTHIANS 11

Read 1 Corinthians 11:13–16

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul discusses appropriate conduct and appearance within the worshiping community.

He addresses the practice of women covering their heads and refers to the different expectations surrounding men's and women's hair.

Paul appeals to what is considered natural when discussing these distinctions.

For many modern Christians, these instructions are understood within the cultural circumstances of the Corinthian congregation.

Most Christian churches do not require women to cover their heads during worship, and many do not regard a man's long hair as inherently shameful.

This is not ordinarily understood as a rejection of biblical authority.

Rather, Christians recognize that Paul's discussion was connected to cultural expectations about appearance, gender, and appropriate conduct within a particular community.

Those expectations could affect how the Church was perceived and whether its conduct was considered respectable within the surrounding society.

As cultural circumstances changed, many Christians came to distinguish the underlying concern for appropriate conduct from the specific customs through which that concern had been expressed.

The comparison is important because Paul appeals to nature in a discussion that many Christians already recognize as culturally conditioned.

We should therefore be cautious about assuming that every use of the language of nature functions in precisely the same way.

16. UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE OF SHAME

Paul also uses language associated with shame, dishonor, and behavior considered inappropriate.

These concepts were especially important in the ancient Mediterranean world, where public honor and shame played significant roles in social relationships.

Conduct could be judged shameful because it violated expectations concerning gender, family responsibilities, social position, or public behavior.

The Greek vocabulary associated with shame and indecency must therefore be understood within this cultural environment.

The language used in Romans 1 and the language used in 1 Corinthians 11 are not identical in every grammatical form or nuance. Nevertheless, both discussions employ concepts of nature, propriety, and dishonor that were meaningful within the social world of Paul's readers.

This matters because modern Christians frequently recognize the cultural dimensions of Paul's instructions concerning hair and head coverings.

We understand that a practice considered dishonorable within one historical setting may not carry the same social meaning in another.

That recognition should encourage us to examine the cultural assumptions involved whenever Paul appeals to nature or shame.

It is not sufficient simply to translate an ancient expression into English and assume that its meaning is self-evident to a twenty-first-century reader.

17. CULTURAL EXPECTATIONS AND THE WITNESS OF THE CHURCH

The discussion in 1 Corinthians 11 also raises a broader question about the relationship between Christian conduct and the surrounding culture.

The early Church existed within societies that had established expectations concerning gender, appearance, public behavior, and religious respectability.

Christians were learning how to express their new identity in Christ while living within those cultural environments.

Some practices could bring unnecessary discredit upon the Christian community because they violated widely recognized social expectations.

Paul's pastoral instructions sometimes addressed these concerns directly.

Modern Christians routinely distinguish between enduring spiritual principles and the particular cultural practices through which those principles were expressed.

For example, a congregation may continue to value reverence, modesty, and appropriate conduct in worship without requiring every woman to wear a head covering.

The principle remains meaningful even when the cultural expression changes.

This illustrates why historical context matters when interpreting Paul's letters.

We should not assume that every cultural expectation reflected in the first-century world must be reproduced without distinction in contemporary Christian life.

18. WHY THIS COMPARISON MATTERS FOR ROMANS 1

The comparison between Romans 1 and 1 Corinthians 11 does not mean that the two passages address identical subjects.

One concerns idolatry and moral corruption, while the other concerns conduct and appearance within Christian worship.

However, the comparison demonstrates that Paul's language about nature and shame cannot be understood responsibly without considering the cultural expectations of his audience.

Many Christians recognize that cultural standards concerning hair length and head coverings have changed.

They do not ordinarily conclude that every man with long hair is living in rebellion against God or that every woman who worships without a head covering is committing a serious moral offense.

Instead, they interpret Paul's instructions within their historical setting.

The same care should be applied when examining Romans 1.

We need to understand what Paul meant by nature, what conduct he regarded as shameful, and how those judgments related to the particular behaviors and circumstances he was addressing.

The modern understanding of sexual orientation was not part of Paul's conceptual framework.

Consequently, it is inappropriate to assume that his discussion of idolatrous behavior and culturally understood sexual practices provides a direct description of loving same-sex relationships today.

19. PAUL IS NOT DESCRIBING SEXUAL ORIENTATION

As we established in the first session, the biblical writers did not understand human sexuality through the modern categories of heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual orientation.

Romans 1 reflects the assumptions and vocabulary of the ancient world.

Paul describes particular behaviors and desires within a broader argument about idolatry and the rejection of God.

He does not discuss the experience of a person who has always been attracted to people of the same sex and who seeks a faithful, loving relationship.

Nor does he address the possibility of a committed same-sex relationship characterized by mutual responsibility, integrity, and Christian devotion.

These distinctions matter because biblical interpretation requires us to identify the subject the writer was actually addressing.

When Romans 1 is used to condemn LGBTQ+ Christians simply because of their sexual orientation, a modern category is being imposed upon an ancient text.

That approach overlooks both the specific circumstances Paul describes and the larger argument he develops concerning religious judgment.

The passage must be allowed to speak within its own context before conclusions are drawn about circumstances it does not directly discuss.

20. THE LARGER MESSAGE OF ROMANS 1–3

Paul's argument does not end with the confrontation in Romans 2:1.

As the letter continues, he develops the conclusion that both Jews and Gentiles stand in need of God's grace.

Possessing the Law does not make a person righteous. Neither does belonging to the covenant people eliminate the reality of sin.

In Romans 3, Paul brings the argument toward its central theological conclusion: righteousness before God is not achieved through religious superiority or human accomplishment but through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

This is the larger framework within which Romans 1 must be read.

Paul is dismantling the assumption that one group possesses the right to condemn another while standing securely above judgment.

His argument exposes the universal human need for redemption.

When Christians isolate Romans 1:26–27 and use those verses as a weapon against LGBTQ+ people, they risk reproducing the very attitude of religious superiority that Paul confronts.

The message of Romans calls believers away from self-righteousness and toward humility before God.

21. THE DANGER OF READING OUR ASSUMPTIONS INTO SCRIPTURE

Romans 1 provides a clear example of why the principles established in Session 1 are essential.

If we begin with the assumption that homosexuality is inherently sinful, we may read Romans 1:26–27 as confirmation without examining the surrounding argument.

We may overlook the repeated emphasis upon idolatry, the deliberate rejection of God, the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers, and the confrontation with religious judgment in Romans 2.

We may also assume that the ancient language of nature and shame corresponds directly to modern understandings of sexual orientation.

But responsible biblical interpretation requires us to examine those assumptions.

We must ask who Paul was addressing, what problem he was confronting, how his argument develops, and what his language meant to the original audience.

The goal is not to force the Bible to support a conclusion we have already reached.

It is to understand the biblical text accurately enough that our conclusions emerge from careful interpretation rather than inherited assumptions.

22. WHAT ROMANS 1 DOES NOT ESTABLISH

After examining Paul's argument, several important distinctions emerge.

Romans 1 does not present a general discussion of sexual orientation as understood today.

It does not describe a loving, committed same-sex relationship between Christians seeking to honor God.

It does not establish that every person who experiences same-sex attraction has knowingly rejected the Creator or embraced idolatry.

The sexual behavior Paul discusses appears within a larger argument about the exchange of worship, the consequences of rejecting God, and the moral corruption associated with that rejection.

His discussion then moves directly into a warning against those who judge others while practicing the same kinds of wrongdoing.

The language of nature and shame also requires attention to the cultural assumptions of Paul's world, particularly when compared with his use of similar concepts in 1 Corinthians 11.

These observations do not require us to disregard Paul's teaching.

They require us to understand the teaching within the argument Paul actually makes.

Romans 1 cannot responsibly be reduced to a simple declaration that all LGBTQ+ people or all same-sex relationships are condemned by God.

23. WHAT THIS PASSAGE SHOULD TEACH THE CHURCH

The message of Romans 1–2 presents a serious challenge to contemporary Christian communities.

It warns against exchanging the worship of God for devotion to created things. It exposes the consequences of human arrogance, greed, dishonesty, cruelty, and the rejection of righteousness.

It also confronts religious people who become so occupied with identifying the sins of others that they fail to recognize their own need for grace.

That warning is especially relevant when churches use Romans 1 to condemn LGBTQ+ people while overlooking the broader moral failures Paul identifies.

A congregation may strongly condemn same-sex relationships while tolerating gossip, pride, greed, dishonesty, or the mistreatment of others.

Paul's argument does not permit such selective judgment.

The person who condemns others must first recognize that possession of religious knowledge does not establish personal righteousness.

The Church's responsibility is not to divide humanity into those who deserve condemnation and those who do not.

It is to proclaim the grace of God in Jesus Christ and call all people toward lives transformed by the Holy Spirit.

When Romans 1 is read through Romans 2 and 3, its challenge is directed toward every reader, including those who believe they are already standing on the righteous side of the argument.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

1. Before this study, how did you understand Romans 1:26–27?
2. Why is it important to read Romans 1 and 2 as a continuous argument rather than treating individual verses independently?
3. What was the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers in the early Church, and why was that relationship important to Paul's letter?
4. How did possession of the Mosaic Law affect the way some Jewish believers understood their relationship with Gentiles?
5. What does Paul identify as the central problem in Romans 1:18–23?
6. Why is the exchange of worship of the Creator for worship of created things so important to Paul's argument?
7. How does the story of the golden calf in Exodus 32 help illustrate the problem of people who know God but turn toward idols?
8. What does Paul mean when he describes God giving people over to the consequences of their choices?
9. Why is it important to recognize that the sexual behavior in Romans 1 appears within a discussion of idolatry?
10. What assumptions might be introduced when Romans 1:26–27 is read without considering verses 18–25?
11. What other forms of wrongdoing does Paul identify in Romans 1:28–32?
12. Why is Paul's reference to people knowing God's judgment important to the argument he develops?
13. What happens to the direction of Paul's argument in Romans 2:1?
14. How does Romans 2 challenge people who condemn others while failing to examine their own behavior?

15. Why is religious knowledge insufficient grounds for claiming moral superiority?
16. What does the Greek word *physis* mean, and why must its use be interpreted within context?
17. How does Paul appeal to nature when discussing hair and head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11?
18. Why do many Christians understand the instructions concerning hair and head coverings as culturally conditioned?
19. How can cultural expectations influence what people regard as honorable, shameful, natural, or inappropriate?
20. Why is it important to distinguish Paul's ancient discussion of sexual behavior from the modern concept of sexual orientation?
21. What differences exist between the people described in Romans 1 and LGBTQ+ Christians who worship God and seek to follow Jesus?
22. How does Romans 3 help explain the larger purpose of Paul's argument in the opening chapters of the letter?
23. What dangers arise when Christians use Romans 1 to judge others while overlooking Paul's warning in Romans 2?
24. How has examining the complete argument changed your understanding of this passage?
25. How might you explain Romans 1:18–2:2 to someone who has only heard verses 26 and 27 quoted as a condemnation of homosexuality?

KEY TAKEAWAY

Romans 1:18–2:2 is frequently used as a direct condemnation of homosexuality, but the passage must be understood within Paul's larger argument about idolatry, human sin, and religious judgment.

Paul begins by describing people who possess knowledge of God yet reject Him and exchange worship of the Creator for worship of created things. The sexual behavior he describes appears within this context of idolatry and its consequences.

The passage does not discuss sexual orientation as understood today, nor does it describe a loving, committed same-sex relationship between Christians seeking to honor God.

Paul's language concerning nature and shame must also be understood within the cultural setting of the first century. His discussion of hair and head coverings in 1 Corinthians 11 demonstrates that appeals to nature and cultural expectations require careful interpretation.

Most importantly, Paul's argument does not end at Romans 1:32. In Romans 2:1, he confronts the person who judges others while failing to recognize similar wrongdoing in his or her own life.

The larger argument of Romans establishes that both Jews and Gentiles need God's grace. Religious knowledge, covenant heritage, and the ability to identify the sins of others do not make anyone righteous before God.

Romans 1 is not a straightforward description of modern homosexuality. It is part of Paul's argument concerning idolatry, the rejection of God, and the danger of religious self-righteousness.

When read in context, the passage challenges Christians to examine their own lives rather than using isolated verses to condemn others.

CLOSING PRAYER

God of truth and grace, thank You for giving us Your Word and inviting us to understand it more deeply. Help us read Scripture carefully, recognizing the historical circumstances, cultural assumptions, and larger arguments through which Your truth was communicated.

Forgive us for the times we have isolated individual verses from their context and used them to judge others without understanding what the biblical writers were addressing. Give us humility to examine interpretations we have inherited and wisdom to distinguish between Your Word and our assumptions about its meaning.

Guard our hearts against the idolatry, arrogance, greed, dishonesty, and lack of compassion that Paul describes. Remind us that knowing Scripture does not make us righteous if our lives fail to reflect Your character.

Teach us to recognize the danger of religious self-righteousness. When we are tempted to condemn others, help us remember our own dependence upon Your mercy and grace.

As we continue this study, deepen our love for Scripture and strengthen our commitment to following Jesus. May our understanding produce greater humility, compassion, integrity, and faithfulness, so that our lives bear witness to the transforming work of Your Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' name, Amen.