

Romans 1:18 - 2:6 - Paul's Exposes Roman Injustice

“Paul’s basic presupposition throughout is that God requires justice - indeed, the name of God and the name of justice are virtually interchangeable, so much so that to turn away from the divine is to fall into injustice. Moreover, Paul will insist that justice is a political concept in that it applies to whole societies, not simply to individuals. The indictment, I argue, does not apply to individuals but to social realities named as Greek or pagan, on the one hand, and as Judean, on the other (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 31).”

But why does Paul expose these failed systems of justice - Greek/pagan and Judean?

Jennings argues that “I believe that this stems from the fact that the messiah of God was rejected by the responsible representatives of Israel and was executed by the responsible representatives of gentile society - the Roman imperial order (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 31).”

Paul exposes injustice in this way - 1:18 “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness (impiety) and wickedness (injustice) of those who by their wickedness (injustice) suppress the truth.”

“It is the suppression of the truth, the willful imprisonment of or silencing of the truth that is the concrete expression of impiety and injustice. ‘Impiety’ and ‘injustice’ are Roman political terms and overlap considerably. Impiety has to do with both a neglect of the gods and a violation of ancient, universal custom or human decency (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 32).”

Paul is operating on Roman/gentile terms, using words they would comprehend, words that are part of the social dialogue and fabric that keeps life ordered. Paul is exposing and unmasking injustice in a way that the Roman people would understand and probably agree with based on what they see taking place in society.

Tacitus, a Roman senator and historian who lived 56 - 117 CE, wrote about Roman life during the time Paul lived and proclaimed the Gospel. Tacitus had keen insight into Roman politics and power. “For example, Tacitus can speak of the ‘melancholy and continuous destruction of our citizens who are being slaughtered when just and driven to suicide: Such was the wrath of heaven against the Roman state’ [*The Annals* 16:16] (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 32-33).”

Paul argues on pagan terms, not to demonstrate that pagans are unjust because that are pagan, but because there are those who suppress the truth and act in ways that are unjust according to pagan values. There would be Romans in the audience nodding their heads in agreement with Paul’s statement.

Paul continues to build his argument, exposing pagan (Roman) injustice. Verses nineteen through twenty-three demonstrate a way of encountering God that would be

familiar to all. God, though hidden, is experienced through mystery, visibly manifested power and divinity, through what God has made. This is another foundational pillar for society as it would be understood by Rome.

Paul's Explicit Case Against Injustice

Now we get into the meat of Paul's argument. In our hyper-sexualized society it is difficult to get past any interpretation that would lead to a conversation about sexuality. We have forced a conversation on sexual identity on Paul that Paul may not have recognized. Again, we must ask ourselves: "Did Paul say that?" or "Do we want Paul to say that?"

"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves, 25 because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen! 26 For this reason God gave them up to degrading (dishonorable is the root of this word - a key Roman concept) passions. Their women exchanged natural intercourse (use) for unnatural, 27 and in the same way also the men, giving up natural intercourse (use) with women, were consumed with passion for one another. Men committed shameless acts with men and received in their own persons the due penalty for their error. 28 And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done. 29 They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, 30 slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, 31 foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. 32 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. (Romans 1:24-31)."

"In Greco-Roman thought of the time, the dishonorable passions (v.26) would have been not so much 'sexual' but social: such as unreasoning rage, anger, delight in cruelty, an insane need to accumulate or display wealth, a lifestyle given over to luxury. These are the 'passions' decried by Stoics, Epicureans, and Cynics as dishonorable. This is also Paul's point (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 35)."

"The indictment that Paul has produced is one directed at the (rumored) behavior of the sociopolitical elites of Rome, the very elites responsible for the administration of what is called justice, yet their injustice is evident to any thinking person (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 37)."

Let's Look at the Evidence

In this instance, context is important. 21st century views on human sexuality and 1st century views on human sexuality are different.

John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed, a Biblical scholar and a leading authority on first-century Palestinian archaeologist, contextualize sexuality in Rome: “We emphatically stress that, then as now, patriarchal sexuality had and has less to do with bodily views or divine imperatives and much more to do with male manipulation, paternal control, and imperial power.... For Rome, not unexpectedly, normative sexual behavior was scripted according to power relations based on gender, age, and status, with the adult landowning male as the most powerful (Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 258).”

Here is some contextual evidence from the Roman historian Suetonius Tranquillus, 69 CE - 140 CE.

The succession of Roman emperors during the time of Paul:

- Augustus 27 BCE - 14 CE
- Tiberius 14 - 37 CE
- Caligula 37 - 41 CE
- Claudius 41 - 54 CE
- Nero 54 - 68 CE

The following are excerpts from the works of Suetonius that demonstrate what Paul calls “dishonorable passions” (v.26).

Life of Tiberius (44.1) - “He acquired a reputation for still grosser depravities that one can hardly bear to tell or be told, let alone believe.”

Life of Caligula (36.1) - “He respected neither his own chastity nor that of anyone else. He is said to have had unnatural relations with Marcus Lepidus, the pantomimic actor Mnester, and certain hostages. Valerius Catullus, a young man of a consular family, publicly proclaimed that he had violated the emperor and worn himself out in commerce with him. To say nothing of his incest with his sisters and his notorious passion for the concubine Pyralis, there was scarcely any woman of rank whom he did not approach.”

Life of Claudius (26.2) - “He then married Plautia Urgulanilla, whose father had been honoured with a triumph, and later Aelia Paetina, daughter of an ex-consul. He divorced both these, Paetina for trivial offences, but Urgulanilla because of scandalous lewdness and the suspicion of murder. Then he married Valeria Messalina, daughter of his cousin Messala Barbatus. But when he learned that besides other shameful and wicked deeds she had actually married Gaius Silius, and that a formal contract had been signed in the presence of witnesses, he put her to death and declared before the assembled praetorian

guard that inasmuch as his marriages did not turn out well, he would remain a widower, and if he did not keep his word, he would not refuse death at their hands.”

Life of Nero (26) - “He so prostituted his own chastity that after defiling almost every part of his body...”

“Even if all of those stories of Caesarian sexual perversity are just overdone facts, unfounded rumors, or prurient imaginings, they indicate, expect, and take for granted a certain dialectic of patriarchal power and penetrative possession on both sexual and imperial levels (Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, 267).”

“The term ‘dishonorable passions’ (v.26) certainly has no exclusive relationship to what we think of as sexuality, save insofar as this exhibits the traits of the social madness decried by Paul and thinking Romans (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 38).”

The point here is that if those at the top of society, who are in charge of the execution of justice, live in a way that is an example of injustice and the breakdown of social order, then the society as a whole is unjust. The stories communicated by the historians demonstrate a level of disorder that would threaten the legitimacy of the empire.

“If Paul inserted here a generic condemnation of same-sex erotic behavior, he would have fatally undermined his indictment. The point is to show the injustice of Roman society in terms that thinking Romans would agree with. But Romans had aversion not to same-sex erotic practices as such but to the very sort of excesses of rape and cruelty that the historians have ascribed to the powerful of this period. Again, it is not necessary to suppose that the ancient historians were in all cases accurately reporting what actually happened during this period; it is only necessary to suppose that they reflect what many or most people thought at the time about the behavior of the rulers of the Roman Empire, and, of course, the city of Rome itself (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 40).”

“The point of this indictment is to delegitimize Roman law of the judgment based upon that law, a judgement that had resulted in the execution of the messiah (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 40).”

Romans 2:1 - “Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others; for in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.”

“Judgement means holding one another accountable to the requirements of some supposed justice and therefore entails that the one judging is also accountable to the claim of justice. This judgement recoils upon the one who intends to judge others (Jennings, *Outlaw Justice*, 41).”