

Romans: The Revealing of Righteousness (part 4 of 9)

How Far We Fell!

Romans 1:24-32

Mark Vroegop

"Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, 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. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them." (Romans 1:24–32, ESV)

There are some Sundays when you might wonder how relevant a particular Bible passage is to where we really live and to our contemporary culture. For example, if you were to read and study certain sections of the Old Testament, especially the book of Leviticus, it might be hard to know how what is written in the Bible applies in the twenty-first century. If you have ever tried to read through the Bible in a year, you know that there are sections of the Bible which are harder to connect to than others.

Our text today is anything but irrelevant. What we are going to talk about today is important, relevant, and controversial. We are going to see how the book of Romans addresses the fallen condition of mankind and how that condition expresses itself in multiple areas, including sexuality and specifically, homosexuality. This is one of the most important passages about the Bible's understanding of the world in which we live and the morality related to our sexuality.

If you were here last week, you knew this text was coming, and my guess is that you have come today with a bit of anticipation. That is good. I am glad that you are eager to hear today's sermon. If you are new today, you need to know that we are in the middle of a study of Romans, and the next series of verses are 1:24-32. So this is not a "one-off," or a soap-box sermon. This is just part of our journey through this book. However, there are others of you who are here, and today's verses make you very nervous. The reason is because your past includes some of the things we are going to talk about, perhaps you are presently struggling with same-sex attraction, or you have someone close to you who identifies himself or herself in this lifestyle. You may even be here today, convinced that same-sex relationships are appropriate, normal, and right.

Here is what I hope to do: I want to carefully and lovingly help all of us to see what this text says about humanity, our brokenness, and our sexuality, and I want to show you how the gospel is the ultimate solution to everything – including our most intimate desires and actions.

By way of review, we observed last week the way that the book of Romans sets the dark backdrop against which the beautiful gospel is displayed. This will be Paul's theme from 1:18 through 3:20. We need this much material on the brokenness of our condition because while most people know that they are imperfect, they need to be desperate in order to embrace the gospel. So Paul is giving us an overwhelming analysis of the problem. In particular we learned about the consequences of unbelief, which include 1) the wrath of God, 2) suppressing the truth, 3) a denial of God, 4) self-worship, and 5) self-destruction. We ended last week in verse 24, with the phrase "God gave them up."

Today I want to show you the three steps of the removal of divine restraint. Or to say it differently: the three ways that God "gives us up." Our text today just takes the main thought from last week's message – unbelief has consequences – and drives it home even deeper and more specifically. Our text shows us how far humanity has fallen.

The Tragic Exchange

We need to begin by restating the problem because this text is designed to be a diagnosis text, showing us our need for the gospel. So please resist the urge to think that verses 24-32 are judgmental, hopeless, and unkind. Rather, these verses are meant to ultimately show us the problem of the human condition so that we can be directed toward the gospel.

There are two places where we see the problem clearly, and they are connected to a tragic exchange. The first place is in verses 22-23, and the second is in verse 25.

"Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." (Romans 1:22-23, ESV)

"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." (Romans 1:25, ESV)

The key word in both texts is "exchange." The problem is the way in which mankind devalues the glory of God in comparison to the value that we give to ourselves. The "exchange" is a decision to ascribe to ourselves or creation what really belongs to God (e.g., affection, worship, obedience, gratitude). It is to exchange the glory of God for the glory of man. Or to make it more personal, it is to do what I think rather than what God thinks.

At the core of this exchange is misplaced worship or idolatry, but this is not only a worship problem. The exchange is expressed in desires, longings, thoughts and actions. So do not make the mistake of thinking that this idolatrous exchange is limited to "spirituality" or something esoteric. Notice in verse 23 that the tragic exchange resulted in the creation of images. And, more specifically, verse 25 connects idolatry to actual service. In other words, there is a direct connection between worship and work and between affection and actions. Human beings were made to worship, and everyone worships someone or something.

Romans 1 gives us a diagnosis of our condition: humans are worshippers who tragically exchange the glory of God for the glory of creation. This exchange is the root of all sin, and it is the essence of our rebellion against God. It is the problem under the problem. It is why we are so prone to self-centeredness, why we are so given to our own comfort, why we are fascinated with heroes, why we make people famous, and why we desire to do things that we know are wrong. The problem under the problem is the exchange of God for ourselves.

Now you must keep this in mind because it is the key to understanding what follows.

Three Effects of the Exchange

Paul links this dark exchange to three examples or effects. Having identified the problem underneath, he shows us the manifestations of our misplaced worship, and they are directly connected to the three-fold use of the term “gave them up” in verses 24, 26, and 28. The trading of God’s glory for our own glory surfaces in three overlapping areas: what we do, what we desire, and what we think. They are overlapping because all of them relate to actions since there is a direct connection between this tragic exchange and how we live. But each effect gives us a different angle on how we express our idolatry.

There are three effects, and I want to cover the first and third quickly because it is the second one, regarding homosexuality, that needs the most explanation.

Effect #1 – Given to lusts leading to impurity (vv 24-25)

This first effect is the most general, and it is designed to make the connection between the spiritual exchange and the physical effect. It is meant to link the problem of physical impurity with the tragic exchange. Notice a few things:

- The word “exchanged” brackets verse 24. It is found in verse 23 and verse 25, and verse 24 is connected to both verses by the words “therefore” (v 24) and “because” (v 25). Clearly there is a connection here.
- The phrase “God gave them up” is connected to verse 18 and the idea of the wrath of God. In other words, God giving us up to our desires is part of God’s judgment. You need not wonder if our culture is under God’s judgment. That judgment is already being revealed (v 18), and the way that it manifests itself is through the sins that plague our culture. Is God going to judge us for our immorality? Our immorality is the judgment!
- The expression of God’s judgment is to allow the lusts of our hearts to be expressed in impurity. The word is one that Paul uses in other places as a blanket term for sexual sin (see 2 Cor. 12:21, Gal 5:19, Eph. 5:3, and 1 Thess. 4:7). So there is a direct connection between the judgment of God and all kinds of sexual impurity. It is important that you see here from the outset that all sexual sin is an effect of the exchange of God’s glory for our own.

Before we even get to the subject of homosexuality in verses 26-28, we need to see how Paul positions his argument. What he is saying is really important, namely that 1) our exchange of God

for ourselves has real and physical and sexual consequences, and 2) every aspect of sexual impurity is part of what is means for God to have “given us up.”

Just think with me for a moment what the world would be like if there was no sexual impurity. Imagine marriages that were never violated, purity that was always a protected gift, nakedness that was never displayed, children who could always feel safe, fathers who never had to worry about the safety of their daughters, relationships that were always healthy and respectful and appropriate, unplanned pregnancies that never happened, and certain diseases that were totally eradicated. Sounds like a dream world, doesn't it? It is hard to over-estimate the destruction on our culture, our society, our families, and our own souls that sexual sin has had. And the problem under the problem is the tragic exchange of God's ways for our own.

Effect #3 – Given to a depraved mind leading to all manner of unrighteousness (vv 28-32)

We will come back to the second effect, but let's see the third and most widespread consequence. Once again we see the phrase “God gave them up” in verse 18, but here it is connected to the mind. The previous effect was connected to lust and sexual sin. Here the issue is a depraved mind and a laundry list of evil. Paul wants us to see that failing to acknowledge God (v 28) leads to mental justification of far-reaching sinful behaviors.” A depraved mind leads to depraved living.

Verses 29-31 provide three sets or groupings of sin:

- Four general vices: “all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, and malice” (v 29). These are terms which are general descriptions of human depravity. Our sin is comprehensive.
- Five “full” sins: “envy, murder, strife, deceit, and maliciousness” (v 29b). These are the kinds of issues that we see throughout the human experience and in our own hearts.
- Twelve societal ills: “gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (v 29b-31). This kind of list is meant to be overwhelming. One after another we are pummeled with the reality of the brokenness of our world.

Twenty-one sins are listed so that we are reminded about the extent of the unrighteousness in our culture and in our hearts. Paul's day was not unlike our own. Sin was rampant, and yet it is easy to forget the truly destructive and tragic reality of the tragic exchange. But if that isn't enough, there is one more thing to note here.

Verse 32 tells that our minds are so warped by our rebellion that we not only do things that we know are wrong, but we actually cheer one another on in our sinfulness. Our minds are so deluded that we are celebrating our own destruction:

“Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” (Romans 1:32, ESV)

The tragic exchange of God's glory has so warped our minds that humans actually recruit others to join them in their self-destruction. Individual rebellion is not enough; we aggressively try to persuade others to drink the deadly potion of self-worship.

Our depraved minds not only justify what we know to be wrong, but we encourage others to join us in all manner of unrighteousness.

Effect #2 – Given to dishonorable passions leading to homosexuality (vv 26-27)

We now return for verses 26-27 and the most potentially controversial part of this text. I hope that by now you can set what Paul says here in context. Homosexuality is presented here as one example among many of the overall disordering and brokenness of our world. And it was just as controversial and even counter-cultural for Paul to write this in the first century as it is in the 21st century. Homosexual activity was a well-known part of Roman culture. For example, historians believe that fourteen of the first fifteen Roman Emperors were involved in homosexuality.¹ Yet, Paul addresses this issue.

Verse 26 identifies that another expression of the uncoupling of God's restraint is the giving us up to "dishonorable passions." This phrase is connected to what we read in verse 24 – "dishonoring of their bodies" – and the failure to honor God in verse 21. So the failure to honor God led to a dishonoring of the body and to dishonorable passions. To state it simply: God gave them up to desires that were not part of God's design.

Paul further clarifies what he means by "dishonorable passions" by applying it to women and men. He wanted this to be very clear:

"For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error." (Romans 1:26–27, ESV)

The dishonoring passions are those that are contrary to nature or contrary to God's design.² In other words, God's plan was for sexuality to be expressed in the covenantal relationship between a man and woman. God created a man and a woman, brought them together, gave them to each other and commanded them "fill the earth."

"And God blessed them. And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.'" (Genesis 1:28, ESV)

¹ Robert H. Mounce, *Romans, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1995). 82.

² Some pro-homosexual interpreters try to make this passage say that Paul was addressing when a naturally oriented homosexual acts "against nature" by being heterosexual or when a naturally oriented heterosexual acts against nature by being homosexual. However, the text does not bear this out. First, it is clear that Paul has in mind people desiring other people of the same sex, not people who are acting contrary to their nature. Second, the term "unnatural" was a standard term for homosexuality in the Roman and Greek cultures. And third, the overall argument of the text and the plain reading of the text do not support an alternative definition of "against nature." For a full treatment of this see: <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/the-other-dark-exchange-homosexuality-part-1>

God designed their sexuality and requisite passions to be a part of the fulfillment of His design. Physiologically, He designed their sexuality to be the means by which the world would be filled with the image of God. The very first command given to Adam and Eve is directly linked to their passion for one another. The expression of sexuality in their covenant relationship would both affirm God's design and fulfill His command.

So when Paul says it is against nature, He is referring to the very essence of God's design and the first of God's commands. Homosexuality runs contrary to the basic design of God and to His first command. Consider what would happen if homosexuality completely replaced heterosexuality. In one generation, the human race would no longer exist. We would self-destruct.

Part of the problem is what we hear in this text. Our culture has uncoupled sexuality from the creation command, and we have mostly made sexuality to be about what I want and what I desire. We have made sexuality only about pleasure, when God intended it to be the pleasurable obedience to a divine command in the context of divine design and a covenant with the effect being the creation of more image bearers. Homosexuality is only one aspect of the disordering of God's design.

But there is also something about sexuality and God's heart for the church. In the book of Ephesians, Paul links the imagery of marriage between a man and a woman to God's care for the church.

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” (Ephesians 5:31–32, ESV)

Therefore, sexuality is rooted in God's design for the created order and for the plan of redemption. It is a sacred dramatization of God's covenantal love for the church and his power in creation.

Why does Paul list homosexuality so specifically? He does so because while homosexuality is only one part of the disordering, it is the most vivid display of the exchange that we talked about before. Remember that the problem under the problem is exchanging the glory of God for an image like myself. Paul uses homosexuality as the most vivid and intimate and powerful example of the extent of that tragic exchange.

Homosexuality, therefore, exchanges God's design for an image like me. The disordering of the culture is clear and evident when men and women give up the God-given design and exchange it for affection for one like myself. It is not that homosexuality is a worse sin than all the others listed here, but it is the most personal and vivid illustration of the exchange of God's design for my desires. Homosexuality is listed here because it shows us the depth of our personal brokenness. The tragic exchange extends so deeply into the fabric of our humanity that we even alter something so personal as sexuality.

This is why this subject is so hard and why it is so volatile. Sexuality is deeply personal, and God designed it to be that way. He designed it to be a “one flesh” relationship or a sacrament that continually binds the hearts of a man and woman together in their covenant. Sexuality was meant to be powerful. Sexuality is powerful.

That is why talking about homosexuality is challenging. Sexuality is so powerful that it feels like it defines who you are. We have even become very comfortable defining people as heterosexual or homosexual as if sexuality equals personhood. But personhood is so much bigger than sexuality. Our culture has elevated sexuality to a level of identity that God never intended.

So why does Paul list homosexuality in Romans 1? He does so because 1) it is the most vivid example of the exchange of God's glory for our own and 2) it demonstrates the depth of the brokenness – that it extends all the way to our most intimate desires.

And the effect of this in verse 27 is that people are handed over to this behavior that the Bible defines as sin. It is simply a restatement of what we have already seen: that God's response to our exchange is to hand us over to our desires.

Homosexuality, impurity, and all manner of unrighteousness are all part of what happens when the tragic exchange of God's glory for our glory takes place.

Implications

Having shown you the argument of Romans 1, let me try to draw a few pastoral and personal implications of what we find here:

1. Romans helps us interpret ourselves and our humanity. This text sheds light on the problem under the problems of our lives. It shows us that the real problem for all of us, regardless of our orientations, our pasts, or our actions is the exchange of God's glory for our own. Addressing that issue is the most important issue. When the sinful exchange of God's glory for our own is fixed, everything else can change.
2. All of us have an orientation towards aspects of this tragic exchange. The brokenness of our world has gotten all the way down into the very fabric of our being. The list of the effects of sin was twenty-one items long, so I'm sure that there are many people who have dispositions toward anger, lust, same-sex attraction, and other issues. My hope is that you would see that these do not define who you are. Yet I would also want to acknowledge that there are some people who struggle more than others in certain areas, and I hope that Romans 1 has helped you understand those struggles better.
3. The story of the tragic exchange is in the Bible so that the gospel can be clear. Paul diagnoses the problem of humanity so that we will see our desperate need for God to rescue us from ourselves. We need Jesus to transform our motivations, our desires, our thinking, and our actions. We need Him to create in us the appetite that savors God's glory above our own. And that is what is possible through a personal relationship with Him.
4. My vision for our church is that we would be a place that reflects the heart of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:10-11 where he gives another list of sins, including the sexually immoral, idolaters, adulterers, men who practice homosexuality, thieves, those who are greedy, drunkards, revilers, and swindlers. But then he says something so important:

"And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." (1 Corinthians 6:11, ESV)

I want us to be a church filled with people who are struggling and fighting with all of the issues in Romans 1, including same-sex attraction. If that fits your fight, I'm sure that you have not always felt like the church was a safe place to be honest and to get help. I just want you to know that our church wants to extend love and grace and help to you. Every person in this church is broken. We are all battling the same issue: our willful exchange of God's glory for our own.

Romans chapter one is in the Bible not just because of a long list of sins, including homosexuality. It is in the Bible to help us see our need for the gospel. It is here to give us a vision of what it means to have God's glory at the center of our lives.

God shows us how far we fell in order to wake us up to our need for Him.

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