

**Sermon for Sunday, September 27, 2009**  
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**THINGS FALL APART**  
**Romans 1:18-32**

The word "**sin**" doesn't carry the weight it once did. We are free to say that a dessert is sinful – especially if it is laden with cream and chocolate. But we hardly say an act is sinful anymore. The charge "You have sinned" used to move Catholics to the confessional and used to move Protestants to stand and confess their sins. But today, "you have sinned" is delivered with a wink, as a joke, not with a frown and a jolt. What changed?

First, we have new labels. We don't sin, we behave inappropriately. We don't live in sin, we adopt an alternative lifestyle. We have issues and problems and weaknesses and need to grow, but we don't sin any more. Why not?

We make excuses. When someone has done wrong, we say they're immature. They had poor role models. They didn't know any better. So we ignore, trivialize, explain, and excuse bad behavior and sin. When a child bangs a ball off a window in class, teachers are sometimes taught to ask, "Why are you doing that? How does it make you feel?" They are not supposed to say, "Stop that this minute." We need to be able to say, "That is wrong."

When we wrong someone, we should say more than "I regret what I did" or "I'm sorry that caused you pain." Sometimes it's necessary to say, "I was wrong, I'm sorry, please forgive me." Furthermore, we need to repent more than once. "Recalling and confessing sin is like taking out the garbage; once is not enough".<sup>1</sup>

Why can't we muster any candor? Because the therapeutic model has commandeered the concept of sin. It's an illness, not a choice. No one wants to be judgmental. "Judging" is the worst social faux pas. The best-known command of Jesus is no longer "Love another as I have loved you," it's "Judge not, lest you be judged". The Apostle Paul shows no reticence about labeling sin. He says:

- The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth (1:18).
- Because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath [and] righteous judgment (2:5).
- All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (3:23).

Paul spends two chapters of Romans on sin: it's nature, origin, forms and results; the way we excuse sin and why the excuses don't hold. Why? Because without a robust concept of sin, the gospel is nonsense. Recall Paul's summary: "In the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith" (1:17).

There is a form of religion that doesn't take sin seriously. Sin is a mistake, not rebellion. And – we think – we can make up for mistakes if we keep the law and show compassion. If I do good to others, God will be pleased.

In this way, good, moral people "forget" our absolute need of the renewal of the Spirit and the gospel of Jesus. Let me ask: Do you ever look to your works and think God will see them and ignore or forget

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be, a Breviary of Sin*, ix-xiii, 1-3

your sins as a result? Maybe He even will be impressed? It's a common thought - even in some Christian circles.

Let's examine ourselves: Purge the excuses, the religion, the efforts to compensate or make up for sin. Your pleasure in small good deeds is religion and religion can kill. If you see it in yourself, repent and root it out. Romans aims to impress us with the seriousness of sin (cf. Jesus on religious hypocrisy, Matthew 23).

As we read, it could seem that Paul is ripping through a long list of evils, but there is an order: His first concern is sins against God; the apex is idolatry (1:18-23).

God's first response to sin is to warn. He also builds restraints into creation. Tell enough lies and people stop listening. Hit enough people and someone will hit back – hard. But eventually He says, "Fine, have it your way" and lets people go and do whatever they please. When He does, things fall apart (1:24-28).

As rebellion proceeds, people "become filled with every kind of wickedness." Paul lists serious sins like murder and strife, but he also mentions envy and gossip. Sin takes many forms! Finally, Paul notes the greatest problem – which is not sin itself, but indifference to it. He says: "They not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (1:32).

## **1. Sins against God (1:18-23)**

### **a. The suppression of the truth**

Romans 1:17-18 states a contrast. It begins with the thesis of the entire book, then moves to the problem that the thesis solves:

Romans 1:17 - The gospel is a righteousness from God revealed in Scripture.

Romans 1:18 - We need the gospel because the wrath of God is revealed from heaven.

In the original and in most translations (but not ours), 1:17 and 1:18 are linked by the word "for." That is, "In the gospel, a righteousness from God is revealed, **for** the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men." The word **for** says there is a reason or connection between the two. We have the gospel and a righteousness from God given by Christ, because God has a righteous anger toward sin.

A while ago, there was a minor tempest in another state, when some people happened to witness the accidental pain a prison officer inflicted on a prisoner. The prisoner was seen whimpering, his lawyer said the man's sentence should be reduced, it got into the press, the ACLU took a stand, etc. In time, a prosecutor stepped forward and pointed out that the man was in jail for a horrific murder. He said, "It's ironic to hear a 50-year-old man and his lawyer whine [about this] when he brutally murdered a teenager."

I heard the righteous anger of the prosecutor. How dare the man complain! He stabbed someone to death and he's whimpering about a scrape on his arm? We feel the same indignation. Now human wrath is always imperfect – mixed with vengefulness or excess or some stray part of our experience.

Nonetheless, we know that it is sometimes imperative to be angry about sin and injustice. Slavery, child abuse, rape and other outrages ought to arouse our wrath. After Cain killed his brother Abel in a fit of jealousy, the Lord said Abel's "blood cries out from the ground". Cries out for what? For justice! (Genesis 4:10).

Unless we understand this, the gospel never fully makes sense. We will never comprehend Jesus' agony in Garden of Gethsemane, never make sense of Jesus' cry on the cross unless we grasp that God has a righteous wrath toward sin. And Jesus bore that wrath on our behalf so we would never taste it. The

message of 1:17-18: Because of God's wrath toward sin, we need the gospel. God's wrath is His personal response to sin. His righteous wrath will be revealed on the last day, but even now there must be some expression of it.

So then, the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness. There are two kinds of sin: Sins against God, godlessness, and sins against man, wickedness. Now someone may say, "How can pagans be held accountable? They have not willfully rejected God's law or his gospel; they have not heard it."

Paul anticipated this and said, "No, men are without excuse because they did know. They sinned against God by suppressing the truth about him." Creation itself reveals that there is a God. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech...their voice goes out into all the earth" (Psalm 19:1-4).

But people suppress this voice. We silence it, we don't want to think about it. When necessary, we're good at not thinking about things: a leak in the bathroom, a noise in the car, a lump, pain in our body, the nagging sense that we should call someone. We block it, we don't want to think about it. So it is with the practical atheist. He knows about God, but suppresses the truth. (In marriage, one is usually better at blocking out leaks, the other at noticing them).

The godless suppress the truth "by their wickedness." I had a conversation with someone who traveled a great deal (he started the conversation). He was amazed that he kept getting into conversations with Christians, for he was indeed very interested in the gospel. He had a problem, however. He was a married man, he traveled to some cities regularly and had acquired a girl friend in several cities. Would he have to give them up if he became a Christian? Yes. In that case, he wasn't willing to be a Christian. That is, sometimes people suppress what they know about God so they can live as they please and stop thinking about God.

For creation reveals enough about God to render mankind accountable. Creation itself demonstrates His "eternal power and deity." Note the playful oxymoron: "His invisible nature [is] clearly perceived;" literally, His unseen character, His power and deity, is clearly seen. The point: men have no excuse. Constantly surrounded by proof of God's power, they refuse to be moved by it (1:19-20).

Result: We experience His wisdom, power, generosity every moment, but we do not glorify Him. He sustains, enriches, sends musicians, but we don't give thanks. The cobalt sky, the skills of mind and body, the abundance of the earth – all these we consume without thanks. Even though they knew God in this way, they neither glorified nor thanked Him.

As a further result, their thoughts are futile, their hearts darkened (1:21-22). The inner self loses its order. They no longer see things as they are. They lost their sense of moral norms. Example: They confuse common things with normal things.

People tend to think that whatever is common is normal. Bad eyesight is so common it seems normal. Normal sight is 20/20; we think of it as perfect, but many people can see better than 20/20. Research has shown that we tend to call a face with average features attractive. Whatever is most common seems right. But take an average American to India and he will seem tall. Take a typical Japanese man to America and people will say, "How skinny," but he is normal and healthy.

Morally, it's normal to speak of your spouse with love and respect. But in many circles, it's so common to mock and disparage your spouse that people think it's normal. I recently read a major article on marriage, in which a woman disparages her husband and the husbands of her best friends. She closes

with this advice: "Avoid marriage or you too may suffer the emotional pain, the humiliation, [even] the expense of breaking up a long-term union at midlife for something as demonstrably fleeting as love."<sup>2</sup>

### **The descent into idolatry (1:22-23)**

"Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man or birds or animals or reptiles."

Example of folly: the best technology goes to warfare. Atomic power goes to bombs.

Many ancients actually bowed before images of "gods" presented by the images. We rightly ridicule such behavior. How foolish to bow before an image that we know to be man-made. On the other hand, we do much the same thing. Our idols are freedom and the pursuit of happiness.

Here's a statistic: conservative Christians, who affirm commitment to marriage, are more likely to divorce than secular Swedes. Why? Because of individualism, narcissism, refusal to sacrifice my happiness even for the good of children when the marriage hits a tough stretch. This is our god: the pursuit of happiness.

### **The lifting of restraint**

"Therefore, God gave them up" ... We see this repeated three times, in 1:24, 26, and 28. God decided to punish mankind by letting us go our own way. In this judicial abandonment, he gives men over to commit whatever sins they please. God deliberately lifts His restraints, He withholds His help. Hands off: He lets the kids eat whatever they please.

As a result, we plunge into more disorderly and destructive desires. This is not God's final purpose. Ideally, people will see the futility of their life and turn to the Lord. He smites in order to heal. If Paul were writing today, he might choose pornography as his illustration and say: Don't you realize that it robs you of the very benefit you seek? But he illustrates with another sexual error.

### **Sins against humanity (1:24-32)**

What I say next will be quite reassuring to some and most unpopular with others. Some heartily agree with Paul. But in many places, his comments about homosexuality are considered repugnant, bigoted and hateful.

People call me a preacher; OK, I accept that. But the most precise terms, if not the most common, are herald, messenger, ambassador. All three indicate that the speaker is a spokesman, representing the interests and ideas of another person. As best he can, the preacher speaks for God.

That's why Paul, God's messenger, says he doesn't much care (in short term) if people like his message: "Men ought to regard us as servants of Christ... entrusted with the secret things of God. Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:1-2). Therefore if his message is distasteful – his next point in 1 Corinthians surely was – it's immaterial. "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court." Paul is God's apostle and spokesman and God says things that challenge and offend people.

So hear what Paul, God's messenger, says about homosexuality in Romans 1: It is a consequence of idolatry (1:23-24). It is sinful, degrading (1:24). It is shameful (1:26-27). Nature itself shows the error (1:26-27). It is self-punishing: People receive "in their own persons the due penalty for their error" (1:27).

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<sup>2</sup> Sandra Loh, *Let's Call the Whole Thing Off*, Atlantic, July 09

These strong statements raise questions: Why is Paul so harsh? Is he condemning everyone who feels some same-sex attraction? Or does he speak against a problem from his day, so his comments no longer apply?

Paul certainly was speaking against practices in his day. I will deliberately obfuscate and confusticate for the sake of younger ears and their parents. Beware of generalizations. Homosexuality was a varied phenomenon in the Empire. It was common in Greece and scorned by many elsewhere. In Greece, it had several forms. There was a link to slavery. Slaves had no rights and masters took slaves, male and female, and used them as they pleased. The concept of "consenting adults" didn't always apply. In some city states (Sparta, Crete), the practice was connected to warfare. In others (Athens), it was connected to coming-of-age rituals. Sometimes there was a large age difference.<sup>3</sup> Much of it was experimental self-indulgence. Many men who led this had wives and children.

The practice was common in Greece, but rhetorically Paul knew that most of his readers agreed with him. The Romans admired masculinity and scorned practices that were tolerated elsewhere. Open homosexuality was a disgrace.<sup>4</sup> Paul wasn't seeking controversy. He wanted to firm up opinions.

Nature teaches that God exists. Nature itself teaches marriage is good, that procreation occurs a certain way. When we ignore the voice, the lessons of nature in one area, we are apt to ignore them in another, to our harm.

Three more points. First, the Bible speaks with one voice. We have the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19, cf Matthew 10:15, Jude 7)! We have the law of Moses: "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman. That is detestable" (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13). In Genesis, God created Adam and Eve. He designed one woman for one man. Jesus agrees: "At the beginning the Creator made them male and female... For this reason a man will be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh" (Matthew 19:4-5). I know many of you disagree with me on this. Perhaps you have studied the matter in detail. All of us have friends or family... Members of the same family can disagree in love if we listen to each other.

Second, sexual experimentation, including polyamory, polygamy, etc. is one thing. Unwanted desires and temptations is another. We must be compassionate and understanding with those who would like to desire for traditional marriage, but do not. The Bible does not condemn people who struggle with desires, it does label it sin when people refuse to struggle, but quickly give in.

Parallel: it is no sin to feel a pulse of envy or anger. It is a sin to indulge that pulse and give in to envy, malice, strife and hate. That is the point of verses 28-32.

Third, the Bible doesn't call this "the worst sin." But homosexuality is a strategic issue today. As most of you know, polygamy and polyamory are on the rise in America, while attacks on marriage grow louder. We need to take a stand for the goodness of marriage. This is one place to do so. So a question:

If we approve or bless gay marriage, on what basis would we do so? The argument: This is the way I am by nature. God gave me these drives. How can you condemn me for expressing myself, for seeking love?

I understand these arguments. I really do. But Scripture is clear. Further, if we ignore the Bible about this, how could we resist arguments for polygamy? They have the same form.

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<sup>3</sup> James Davidson, *The Greeks and Greek Love*,

<sup>4</sup> Winter, *After Paul Left Corinth*, pages 110-20

Polygamists will say their arrangement is loving, too: Many Christian women long to marry but cannot find a suitable mate because men are immature, immoral, and faithless. Yes, polygamy falls short of God's ideal, but we hardly live in an ideal world. Besides, polygamy is more natural than homosexual union and it promotes marriage and procreation. Finally, the argument may go, if "male and female" is irrelevant to marriage, why should the number "two" be the central, immutable feature?

### **The array of sin (1:28-32)**

Paul closes with a long list of vices. First, sins against God, then sexual sins, now social sins. The first are general: wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. The next five flow from envy. Envy often has a central place in sin lists because it is the foe of love, joy, and grace. It's a gnawing pain and anger that someone has something that we do not. It does not give or share or rejoice, it grasps. It's a selfish sin and it leads to others: murder, strife, deceit and malice.

The final cluster focuses on slander, gossip and anger. Pat Morley said something that unites them: "The same person who will [despise] me because I am too pale, too fat, too gray is the same person who, if I respond to all their complaints, will then gossip I am too tan, too skinny, [and] silly for coloring my hair. If somebody doesn't like me for who I am, they're not going to like me the way they want me to be either."

### **Perversion of conscience (1:32)**

Last, many sins are premeditated. And many who are too timid to sin boldly – to start a brawl in a bar – gladly will cheer for those who do: "They not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them" (1:32).

### **The righteousness of God**

This leads to a final question. A friendly critic may say: This sermon illustrates the problem with Christianity: it's judgmental! First, I have neither the position nor the authority to be anyone's judge.

But while no man is a judge, we make judgments all the time. We judge who we might need to trust – our doctor, our hair-cutter. Parents size up potential baby-sitters: "Can I entrust my child to her?" We loan our car; it comes back with no gas and a scrape on the bumper. We judge: "I'd better not loan this person my car again unless I don't care..."

Jesus said, "Judge not lest you be judged" but he also said, "Do not judge according to appearances; judge with righteous judgment" (John 7:24).

God is judge. We must know this. He justifies or condemns. He is good enough to describe His standards in advance, so we can be prepared. Not by being good enough. No one is. We know this. Rather, He describes the array of human sin that we might repent of them. The godlessness, the sexual sins, the envy and anger. Then we will embrace the "righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith" (1:17).