

## **Romans: God Gave Them Over (1)**

**Romans 1:24-25**

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If you have your Bibles, I would invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 1 as we continue to study through Paul's letter to the Romans. We have been in Romans chapter 1 for a number of weeks now, and we even began a new section a few weeks ago when Paul introduces the words of Romans 1:18, where he begins a long diatribe.

We have already said that from Romans 1:18 all the way to Romans chapter 3, verse 20, the apostle Paul is announcing the bad news. Now Paul is speaking to Christians. He is writing to a Christian congregation in Rome. He is writing from Corinth. But, for the meantime, he is going to speak about two types of rejection of the one true God. In Romans chapter 1, beginning in verse 18 all the way to the end of the chapter, he wants to talk specifically about what we would call today Pagans. That is those who make no specific Christian profession. They might not even make a religious profession of faith. And yet, the apostle Paul says they are still guilty before God, for they know Him. He has revealed Himself to them in them and in creation. They know what He is like. They know that they ought to honor Him, and they don't. And he spends a long time talking about bad news to the Pagan.

And then he turns in Romans chapter 2, and he talks about a religious person, a person who is very diligent in living out a religious sort of life, and yet is living that life apart from God. And then he will sum up in chapter 3 by basically saying this: everyone is under the condemnation of God, who is not in Christ Jesus.

Today, we are in the middle of that first section where he is speaking to Christians. He is speaking especially about Pagans, those who do not have a Christian or even a Jewish or religious profession of faith. Those who may be religious or superstitious in some sense, but reject basic truths about the one true God. And he is speaking about how God's wrath manifests itself in them. So let's hear God's holy and inspired word, beginning in verse 24.

"Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God

for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy inherent and authoritative word. May He write its truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

*Our Father, we ask that You would open our eyes, that we would see the truth of Your Word. If we come, O Lord this day, with hardened hearts, skeptical of You and of Your truth of the gospel way of salvation, we pray that You would soften our hearts in Your hands. We pray that we would see the truth and that by the grace of the Holy Spirit, we would respond to it. We come as believers this day, O Lord, root us and ground us in the truth. Help us to understand ever more the greatness of Your love to us. And enable us better to witness by word and by life to the saving truth of Jesus Christ. We ask these things in His name. Amen.*

You can't understand the good news, without the bad news. That is the true for many reasons. One important reason it is true, is because if you have not diagnosed the problem, the basic problem that mankind has, you cannot apply a solution that will work. That is true in all areas of life. If you are working in any particular field, and you misdiagnose the problem, your solution for the problem will be wrong. And let's face it, there are many different opinions in our world today about what our problem is. There are many influenced by New Age thinking, who think that our basic problem as human beings is that we have forgotten who we really are. We are all actually divine, New Age teaching would tell us. We need to look within to find the god within us. To remember who we are. To realize that we are all one. That there are no real distinctions out there between good and evil and right and wrong and God and not God. All is one, and we ought to all be united together as brothers and sisters, realizing the divine in us. Wrong diagnosis. Wrong solution. Our problem is not forgetfulness. Our problem is not that we have forgotten that we are god. We never were. The memory is not there. That is not the problem and so any solution based upon that diagnosis is going to incorrect.

There are others who have different solutions to that. They have a somewhat Christian kind of belief. They say, you know, mankind's basic problem is it doesn't realize that God already savingly loves them. Everybody is already God's child, they just don't realize it yet. And so the gospel is to tell them that. They need to realize that they're already God's child. They are already accepted and they just haven't accepted their acceptance. If that is your version of the gospel again, it is based on a misdiagnosis, because that is not what the gospel says. The gospel does not say that all mankind is already in a saving relationship with God, it just needs to have it announced. That is what our Barthian friends used to say when they would go to the mission field. Our job is to go out there and tell people that God already loves them and has already forgiven them. They need to find out the truth, which is already true about them, that they don't yet know. And we used to say, we beg to differ. We believe that the gospel is different from this.

You see, if you misdiagnose man's problem, you will not be able to apply the solution. Paul, here is saying, that our basic problem is idolatry. We are in rebellion against God. And we need redemption from that rebellion in sin. And that rebellion is only remedied in Jesus Christ. Until we understand the problem, we won't be able to embrace the solution.

And so Paul begins with the bad news, not because he was a person that liked to dwell on the negatives, not because he enjoyed speaking about very difficult topics, but because it was the truth and the truth is good for the soul's of men and women. In fact, it is absolutely essential for their eternal salvation. And so the apostle Paul pauses to explain the bad news in order that we will understand the good news. And in this passage today, he continues to confirm some things that he had already said. Let me just remind you of two things.

First of all, in Romans chapter 1, verse 18, Paul had asserted that everyone has the truth, but we suppress it in righteousness. That is so important because in our day and age, we, even as Christians are dominated by a fear that basically most people out there do not believe in God, and it is our main job to try and get them to believe in God. As far as the apostle Paul is concerned, that is not the big problem. Men are.

When Paul is in a Pagan culture, Athens, he finds a sanctuary in which there is an altar to an unknown god. And what does Paul come to them and say? God is not unknown. The problem is not that He is unknown, the problem is that He is known and He is not worshipped. He says the same thing here doesn't he? Our basic problem is not that we don't know that there is a god out there. We do. We just don't want to worship Him. We don't honor Him. We suppress the truth and unrighteousness. And as we studied last time in verses 21-23, he tells us explicitly how it is that we go about suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. Even though we know God, and even though we know we ought to honor Him, Paul says we do two things. First, we are ungrateful. We are not thankful for what God has provided, and everything we have, we have we have just prayed, everything we have comes from Him. We are not grateful. Secondly, we suppress the truth in unrighteousness by not worshipping Him. We know Him, we know about Him, we know what He is like, we know what He does, but we don't worship Him. And so the apostle says we suppress the truth in unrighteousness. But he goes on to say, having done that, in verses 21-23, it leads us into idolatry. You suppress the truth he says, it leads you into idolatry. And in the passage we are going to study today for a few moments, he now goes on to explain to us the consequences of idolatry: apostasy from the truth. We have the truth, we suppress it, and leads to idolatry he says. And idolatry leads to something else. That something else is what Paul has before us today.

Now before we look at what Paul says about God's judgment in sin, I want you to think about a question for a moment. What is it, how is it, that we normally think of God judging sin? We look around at our culture today, and sometimes we look

at the natural disasters that befall us, and we ask ourselves the question: Is that God sending us a message? Is that God's judgment against us, when we see that tornado or that earthquake, or that tidal wave, or that hurricane, or that natural disaster, or whatever sort. And it is not inappropriate to ask that kind of question. I want to say, very quickly, the writers of the Old and the New Testament all understood that God used means in the ordering of natural creation, but they also recognized that God controlled those means for His own purposes. And that often times, He would use natural calamities in order to send a message to His people. So it is perfectly possible that God can visit His judgment through natural calamity. On the other hand, sometimes we say, well you know, God is bringing His judgment against it and we can see it in the human calamities around us. When we see a Columbine High School, or something like this. Often times, we look at one another, and we ask, is this God's judgment upon us as a nation because we have turned our back upon Him? In this passage, the apostle Paul says something absolutely shocking. He says, though those things are true, Paul says, God's judgment against sin is universally and pervasively seen in sin itself. That is, that sin unchecked is in itself, God's judgment against sin. Chew on that for a few moments, and I would like you to see two or three things in this passage.

### **I. God's judgment against sin involves His delivering us into the hands of our own desires!**

First, in verse 24, Paul has just explained to us, in 21-23, how people suppress the truth and unrighteousness. Now, Paul is going to reveal to us the consequences of suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. Look at what he says, therefore, God gave them over in the lust of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. In other words, Paul says that God's judgment against sin involves His delivering us into the hands of our own desires. We see God's hand of judgment against sin, when we see Him withdrawing the restraints in our society against that sin and that sin beginning to work itself out in our conduct individually and corporately. Paul is saying that in and of itself is a judgment against sin.

I was struck a couple of weeks ago with the passage that we were contemplating in which we mentioned partial birth abortion. Do you remember the Old Testament reading that occurred that morning? It spoke of God's judgment against Babylon even judging the children of Babylon. And it struck me, what an example of what Paul is speaking about here, because it is not God bring some outside force against Babylon to judge and kill the children of Babylon. We are doing it to ourselves. And so Paul says, God's judgment against sin is sin. You know, we often think, Lord, if we continue to commit this crime of abortion, well You will bring judgment against this nation. The apostle Paul, if he were standing by me side today, would say, that is His judgment against this nation. You are killing your own kind. Animals in the wilderness know that you cannot do that and

survive. You are manifesting even in your own conduct my judgment against sin.

Now contemplate what Paul says here. He tells us that God's judgment against sin involves His delivering us into the hands of our own desires. Look at verse 24. I would like you to see three things there. First of all, notice Paul's emphasis. God delivers. His judicial deliverance of us into our own desires. God gave them over. Now you know that he uses that phrase three times, verse 24, verse 26, and verse 28. In verse 24, he says, that God gives us over to these impure desires, verse 26, he says that God gives us over to degrading passions, verse 28, he says, God gives us over to a depraved mind. Notice all that, the language of the heart, indicating that the totality of what we are in the inner man, in the depth of our being, in the seed of the personality in that aspect of our humanity that defines everything else that we are that we are being corrupted. And the apostle sees this as God's judgment. God gave them over.

You know that language that is used there, God gave them over, is the same language which is used of the Jews handing Jesus over to Pilate. It is the same language used of Pilate handing over Jesus to His potential executors. It is the same language used in Romans 8:32 to speak of God delivering over His Son to pay the penalty of our sin. The apostle Paul is saying, God's judgment against sin is when He delivers you over into your own desires. The Greeks used to say, whom the gods would destroy, they answer their prayers. And what Paul is saying is when a human heart says, I rebel against you God, I want to be my own god, I want to do it my own way, then God says, okay, have it your way. And that judicial deliverance, that abandonment into our own desire becomes our own punishment. That is why C.S. Lewis could say in a provocative way, that "The doors of hell are locked from the inside." Those in hell don't want to get out of it, they have chosen it. They have chosen their sin, they have chosen their wickedness. They love it. And God abandons them to their own desires.

Notice also, in this passage, He abandons them, what? To their desires, the desires of their hearts in impurity. Sin is the punishment of sin here. It is not just that people sin and thus God will bring judgment against them in some sort of calamity. It is that their very deliverance over into doing what they want to do is God's judgment against their sin. He brings judgment against them by letting them go ahead and do what they so strongly desire to do. It is His judgment. When He removes the constraints and allows them to go the way of their own wicked hearts.

Notice here too, Paul's connection between sexual sin and idolatry. Paul was writing this letter to the Romans from Corinth. And Corinth was a famously immoral city. In Paul's time, the idiom 'to act like a Corinthian' meant to act in an immoral way. It was a sailor's port town. It had a temple in the city center. You could look up and see the temple, and there were over one thousand cult prostitutes servicing that temple. And the apostle Paul could see the connection visibly displayed between the idolatry of the Corinthians and their immorality.

Note that connection between idolatry and immorality. Why? Because if you will not conform your desires to the truth, you will conform the truth to your desires. And thus, there is always an inseparable connection between idolatry and immorality. Idolatry is simply immorality worked out. And immorality is simply idolatry worked out. Thus, the connection. We either conform desire to truth, or truth to desire.

And Paul is teaching us here in response to some who might have said to him, now come on Paul, there may be a few bad people, but people are basically good. Or to those people, who might have said, oh come on Paul, I mean God may occasionally be angry at me, but He is not pervasively angry. We are not all under the condemnation of God. And the apostle disproves those objections by pointing us to the pervasiveness of immorality. He doesn't point us to some extreme example in the culture. He points right to the mainstream of the immorality of the culture. And he says, look, you see the pervasiveness of immorality. That is indisputable evidence of ungodliness. Ungodliness, idolatry, leads to that immorality. And the immorality itself is an evidence of God's wrath against the immorality. And therefore, simply by showing the pervasiveness of immorality, Paul has proven two things. He has proven the doctrine of depravity empirically, and he has proven the doctrine of the wrath of God because you don't have to look for an earthquake or a volcano destroying Vesuvius to see the wrath of God against sin. The wrath of God against sin is seen when He breaks lose the restraints of sin in a society and lets sinners go their own way. Now, I hasten to say my friends, that what Paul is saying is as fresh as the ink on our morning paper. Now people who say that the Bible is not relevant have not read Paul recently. Because what Paul is saying about his own culture is pervasively true of every culture. He knew that. He was writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This is God's Word. And it is eternally relevant to our situation. We look around at our culture, and we see the truth of what Paul is saying. What is Paul saying? God's judgment against is the delivering of us into the hands of our own desires.

## **II. Our fundamental problem is idolatry.**

And then in verse 25, he goes on to say something else. He specifies our fundamental problem. And he says our fundamental problem is idolatry. It is the root sin. And I want to say, that Paul understood as did the Old Testament prophets that idolatry doesn't just mean crafting a hand-made God. Idolatry means worshipping anything that is not the true God. In fact, the better the thing is, the better an idol it makes. When we go to the movies and see a bad guy who is an idolater, the idol that he worships is usually some sort of a horrible, terrible, evil thing. The best idols, however, are things that in and of themselves are good. In fact, our idolatry manifests itself in a couple of ways. Either, we will have a tendency to remake God, in such a way, that He will not poke His nose in our business. Or, we make an idol out of something by vesting all our desire for

significance and security and control and comfort in that thing instead of in God.

Let's talk about those two things for a moment. There are many in our world today, who are very uncomfortable with the bothersome god of the Bible, who is always telling you what you ought to do. We want our freedom. And so we have invented gods, that don't bother us. We can use them when we want, and then we can put them back up on the shelf. And pick up the morning newspaper on Saturday morning and see an article in which it is described, a young man going to a church and speaking to some members of that church, and some members of that church said some negative things about other denominations. And the author of the article goes on to say, isn't it terrible that we have all these differences and different denominations, and different beliefs and such. After all, we are all the same, we are all one, we all worship the same God, we worship Him through different ways, and through different names, but it is all the same god. Wrong. That is a false god. Nobody, who is an orthodox Jew, an orthodox Christian, an orthodox Catholic, an orthodox Protestant, or an orthodox Muslim believes that. And yet, that is a very popular teaching today. The Bahai faith manifests that particular belief. But as far as Paul is concerned, it is utterly false. And yet that god is so convenient, because you say, oh yes, God is love, and He would never interfere with what I want to do. So I use Him when I want, and I put Him back up on the shelf. I have created a god in my own image. He doesn't get in my way, doesn't tell me what to do, doesn't make things difficult. That is one way we make idols.

But we also make idols out of worshipping things that are good, but aren't God. Family, maybe. Family is a wonderful thing. But if you see your ultimate significance and your ultimate safety and your ultimate fulfillment and satisfaction as being vested in a person, your husband, your wife, your children, you have made them an idol. No human being can possibly give you the satisfaction that you need as a creature created in the image of God. Only God can do that. That is the irony of it, isn't it? When we vest all of our significance in a marriage, or in a family, we are ultimately disappointed, because no human being can fulfill what we need. Only God can. But we have also made it an idol. It is a good thing, but we can make it an idol. If it is the place where we find our ultimate hope, our ultimate significance, our ultimate satisfaction, our ultimate comfort.

There are so many other things that can be idols, money, work, power, popularity, wanting to be liked, appearance, food, anything under the sun can be an idol that we put our hope and our dreams in instead of God. And suddenly we have become no less idol worshippers than the human being who goes out and cuts down a tree and comes home and carves it up and sets it on his mantle piece and worships it at night. Because idolatry is placing anything before the one true God. And Paul is saying to us, that is what we need to be saved from, because every human being has a natural inclination to that idolatry.

There is one God. There is no God, but God. And there is no rest for any people

who rely on any god, but God. And so the apostle Paul says, idolatry is our fundamental problem and only Jesus Christ can save us from it.

### **III. God's truth, glory and blessedness are independent of our assessment, rejection or acceptance.**

But he has one more thing to say. Right at the end of verse 25, even as he has been speaking of the way that human beings dishonor their Creator, he gets to that word, Creator, a recognition of his Creator, God, and he pauses and he says, He is blessed forever, amen. Have you ever been talking to a devout Muslim and they come across the name Allah, and they have to pause and say, Allah be praised, or they come across the name, Mohammed, and say, may his name forever be blessed. It is a very common way of acknowledging the essential work in the near east of the creator or the prophet. And the apostle Paul, here vexed to the core of his being, by being in the midst of an idolatrous world, that dishonors his God and does not worship his God as the one true God and Paul gets to that word Creator, and he just has to pause for a second and by way, He is blessed forever. Whatever you think or not.

And that is exactly the truth that Paul is sharing with you here. God's truth, God's glory, God's blessedness are independent of our assessment. They are independent of our rejection or acceptance of Him. God, in order to be blessed doesn't need to have our approval. God, in order to be true, does not have to have our concurrence. Remember the bumper sticker, which said, God said it, I believe it, that settles it. As far as the apostle Paul is concerned, that is wrong. God said it, that settles it, I don't care whether you believe it or not. God's truth is not dependent upon my concurrence with it. It's true. It is the same with God's glory. God's glory is not going to be in the least diminished by my refusal to glorify Him, but, I will never participate in His glory, if I do not glorify Him.

You know it is one of the ironic things, isn't it, I can refuse to glorify God, and it is not going to impinge upon His glory in one iota. But it is going to destroy me. If I refuse to give myself away to Him, I am in the end destroyed, but if I give myself to Him, and I glorify Him, I find that I am made what I was intended to be. I am fulfilled, I am satisfied. I am filled up to overflowing in Him. And the apostle Paul wants us to realize that God's glory is not impacted by our rejection of Him.

You see, the gospel is not, oh no, we Christians better get out there and tell as many people about Christ as we can, or God is not going to be glorified. Oh no. God will be glorified. The idols will not triumph. The question is, will we participate in that glory? And the answer to that question is only determined by whether we will bow the knee to the one true God, or whether we will continue to worship our false god. If we continue to worship our false gods, whatever they are, we will never participate in the true glory. But if we will bow the knee to Him, and if we will embrace Him by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, we will find that in an



amazing way, He will determine to share His glory with us. And fill us with His glory. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, convict us of our own self-worship and idolatry. And show us of the way of glory, the way of the cross, the way of Christ. Help us to turn away from our sin and from ourselves and from our false gods. To cast ourselves at the feet of the Savior who exalts us, with Himself and leads us in triumphant procession. We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

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