

Romans: God Gave Them Over (2)

Romans 1:26-27

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If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans, Chapter 1. The first seventeen verses of Romans are shot through with the gospel, even though to a large extent they are introductory. In the first seven verses Paul is giving greetings to the Roman churches. Even in the context of those verses he draws attention to the gospel in verses 11 through 15. He's basically sharing the shape of his desire for coming to minister at Rome, and even in those words the gospel is present.

In verses 16 and 17 he gives you a summarization of the gospel, the theme of the whole of the rest of his book; and he tells why he's so excited about the gospel. Why the gospel just leaves him in wonder and bafflement when he thinks about it. And it's almost like somewhere between verse 17 and 18 somebody said, "Oh, that's real nice, Paul, but so what? I don't need this gospel. I'm basically a good person." And the apostle Paul does a gigantic, "Oh no, you're not." And from 1:18 all the way to 3:20, he's explaining to us why we need the gospel.

Now I'd like you to look at verses 18 through 25 for a few moments. Look at 18 through 23 first. We'll get to 24 in a moment. In verses 18 through 23, Paul is basically saying a very few simple things. First of all he's saying everybody knows God. Everybody knows good from evil, right from wrong. Everybody knows that God judges evil. He judges wickedness. Nevertheless, though they know God, and though they know they ought to worship God, they don't worship God. And when they don't worship God, they worship nothing, they worship anything. And amongst the anything that they worship are themselves, their own sinful desires, and even beasts, he says. They revert to idolatry. And that idolatry plunges them, Paul says, into the darkness of heart.

Now again, between verse 23 and 24, it's almost as if somebody says, yeah, Paul, you're going to have to give me some examples of this. I'm not sure whether I can buy this. And Paul says I'd be happy to give you some examples of this. That's exactly what he begins to do.

In verses 24 and 25 he gives example 1. In verses 26 and 27, which we'll look at today, gives example two. In verses 28 to the end of the chapter, he gives example 3.

What Paul is doing is empirically demonstrating for us total depravity. One Christian theologian has said rightly that total depravity is one Christian doctrine that you can prove empirically. You don't have to accept it on faith. You can demonstrate it, and that's exactly what Paul is doing here. He is demonstrating the doctrine of total depravity. But more than that Paul is explaining why we are all sinners, he's showing us the proof that we are all sinners, and he's explaining to us why we need the gospel. So if you'll bear that in mind, it will help you understand what he's doing today. Paul is going to do something that is very much against the grain of our societal belief today. He is going to use as an example of the depths of sin a behavior and a life style which many people are working very hard to normalize in our society.

Many of you will notice that just this last week Tufts University's student government kicked the Intervarsity Fellowship off campus. They banned them from meeting on campus because they refused to appoint into a position of leadership a young woman who was an open avowed homosexual. They were happy to have her in the group. They were happy to have her as part of the meetings. They were happy to have her participate and hear the Bible taught; but they were not willing to have her in leadership because her own life style contradicted the scriptural standards. And so the student government kicked them off the campus. Now temporarily that position has been reversed by the faculty and administration, but it will come up for review again when the student government meets in the fall. The Boy Scouts are under siege right now. Those who want homosexual people to be able to serve as scout masters in the Boy Scouts. Most of the mainline protestant denominations in our day have strong gay and lesbian lobbies. Some of those protestant denominations have actually endorsed the homosexual lifestyle. One of our PCA missionaries to Europe who works in Germany has told us that in Germany it is not the government, and it's not even the gay and lesbian lobby, it is the state church in Germany descended from the work of Martin Luther that is working hardest in German society to normalize homosexuality. And then, of course, we live in a day and age where for the first time in history, Christian scholars are arguing for the normalization of homosexuality. It was in 1955 when Bailey's work first came out arguing something that had never been argued for 1955 years in Christian history. And that was that the Bible didn't really condemn homosexuality. Well, as we study this crystal-clear passage today, we are going to come right up into contradiction of all those trends. I'm perfectly aware of that. So let's make sure as we hear the word of God today that we do our best to listen to what it says, and not what we want it to say. Let's listen to God's word. Turn with me to Romans, chapter 1, and we'll look at verses 26 and 27.

Romans 1:26-27

For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural, and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.

Thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired and inerrant word. May He add His blessing to it. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, we ask that by the grace of your spirit our own opinions, even our own desires would be brought into captivity to the truth of the word of God so that we might be freed from our own self-imposed bondage to sin and might be able to see the light. We pray, O God, that You would strip away any presuppositions or preconceptions which will blind us to the truth or to the force of Your truth this day. And we ask that by the grace of God that You would enable us to embrace that truth unto everlasting life. These things we ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

The apostle Paul is speaking to the Roman culture, and to all cultures, and he is giving a diagnosis, having asserted that God in response to the heart sin of idolatry had plunged and had allowed the people, the sinful people of the world to plunge into a state of sin-darkened hearts, he now gives some evidences for those. In verses 24 and 25, he said one of the first evidences of God's judgment against sin are passions which are themselves unclean. And you know we wouldn't have to look far in our society today to find unclean passions. There are all sorts of things that encourage those unclean passions in our society today. You can't turn on the radio, you can't turn on the television without being encouraged in unclean desires. Many of you today are struggling with internet pornography. And that internet pornography or pornography in various other forms is encouraging unclean desires. And the apostle Paul says that the pervasiveness of unclean desires in a society is evidence of God's judgment against that society.

Remember we said Paul's shocking revelation in the passage verses 24 and 25 of Romans, chapter 1 is that sin is God's punishment against sin. It's not just that God brings extraordinary consequences in His punishment against sin, it's that pervasive sin is its own punishment. God gives us over, not only to the consequences of that sin, but to the sin, the behavior, the practice itself. And it's an evidence of God's judgment. And he continues that argument here in verses 26 and 27.

I. All are sinful and in need of grace: this sinfulness is seen in the pervasiveness of sexual perversion in society.

He says once God in His judgment gives us over to unchecked, unclean desires, what results from that is perverted passions. Sexual perversions in which we fling in all directions against God's holy word. And he breaks that down to three assertions in this passage, and I'd like you to look at those with me for just a few moments. In the first half of verse 26, the apostle Paul is giving his second proof that we are all sinners, and that immorality is God's punishment on idolatry. He's teaching us here that all are sinful, and all are in need of grace. And so he says look, the sinfulness which is pervasive in society, and which in fact proves my assertion that we are all in need of grace, this sinfulness that is pervasive in society is seen, for instance, in sexual perversion in the society. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions. These shameful desires unchecked by the grace of God are resulting in out-of-control sexual passions.

And the interesting thing is that Paul says these passions themselves are inherently degrading. They are inherently dehumanizing. When we reject God and we reject his standards, we don't become more free and more human. We become less free. We become bound. We become in bondage to those desires. And we become less human, because we are less reflecting the image of God, because God is holy. And in our own righteousness we become less and less human. Jim Philip puts it this way: "Man's refusal, even while knowing God, to honor Him as God constitutes a revolt against his own destiny." We're destroying ourselves in other words when we rebel against God. And this inevitably leads to the loss of the very qualities that constitute true life.

Now Paul is not picking out some marginalized group of society out of the general population and saying, see these people are really bad; and they need my gospel. He is picking this particular perversion. This particular expression of sin as proof of the pervasiveness of sin in society, and hence the pervasive need for grace. Paul's not saying, you know, there's about two percent of us that have a real problem here. Let the other ninety-eight percent of us – we're in great shape. He's saying, look, look at the pervasiveness of this sin. It hits every part of your society. It hits creative people; it hits intelligent people; it hits productive people. This is evidence of the pervasiveness of sin, and hence, evidence of the pervasiveness of our need for the gospel. He's telling us this, in other words, not so that all of us normal people can feel good about ourselves and look down upon those abnormal people. He's telling us so that we would realize that it is God's saving grace in believers, and his common grace in unbelievers that is the only thing that keeps us from doing the things, the degrading things, that we are capable of doing. The only thing that stands between us and going the way of our flesh is the grace of God, the apostle Paul is arguing. When God is not glorified, when God is not worshiped, when God is not honored, when the one true God is not adored, then unrighteousness invariably results unless God in His grace restrains it. And what is Paul saying? When we see pervasive immorality, we are seeing God's judgment because He is removing the restraint. God gave them over.

The pervasive sin in our society, my friends, does not merely await the judgment of God; it is the judgment of God. Paul is saying, look around Romans. Look around at your society, look around at the sexual perversion. That's evidence of God's wrath which is evidence of your sin, which is evidence of your need of grace. That's why you need to hear my gospel.

Now again, it's almost like between the first half of verse 26 and the second half somebody says, "Oh come on Paul, you're going to have to get more specific. You've got to be kidding. You think that degrading passions are pervasive?" And the apostle says, "Uh, huh. Let me give you two examples."

II. God judges sin by sin: this is seen, for instance in the completely unnatural practice of lesbianism.

And this is the second thing I'd like you to see. Look at the second half of verse 26. He says, "Let me give you a very good example of this. ". . . for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural." Paul does not just spout off some sort of theoretical sociology here. He says let me get very specific with you. Look around, Greco Romans. Even your women are given over to degrading passions. They are involved in female homosexuality. Paul is putting his finger on a problem which proves the pervasiveness of sin in this very exalted and advanced society. He says, let me tell you. When women have that kind of relationship with one another, it's unnatural.

Now it's interesting. Paul doesn't say that's unbiblical, though it is. Paul himself in this passage makes it very clear that what he is saying about homosexuality is, in fact, based upon the Old Testament Law. And especially Leviticus, chapter 18, and Leviticus, chapter 20. But Paul doesn't say, you know, that unbiblical. What he says is, it's unnatural. What does he mean by that? He means a lot of things by that, but he means at least this.

He means first of all that you don't even have to have common sense to know that this is wrong. He says all you have to know is basic anatomy, and all you have to do is know animal biology to know that this is not the way it's supposed to be. Nobody out there works this way. There are no female to female relations in the animal world like this. Your anatomy is even against it. It's not supposed to work that way. You don't even have to have any common sense to understand this, Paul says. It's unnatural. It's against nature. It's against the created order. It's against the way God made us to be. And when he says it's unnatural, he means that everybody knows that. This is apparent to everyone. And, therefore, the people who engage in this have to work very hard to make their minds conform to their unnatural thinking and behaving. So the apostle Paul brings a strong charge against this particular type of activity.

Now I'm well aware that we live in a society that tends to do two things with the Bible's teaching about homosexuality. It either says, well, we've all misunderstood the Bible. For 2000 years, Protestants Catholics, Greek Orthodox, Jews have all misunderstood the Bible. Actually the Bible doesn't condemn homosexuality. And then there are others who say, well, the Bible's wrong. We have understood the Bible, but the Bible is wrong. And neither of those answers will do. First of all, if you can mistake the Bible's teaching on homosexuality, you can get the Bible to say anything. If you can mistake what the Bible says about homosexuality, you can make the Bible say that the moon is made of green cheese, and it's raining lollipops. The Bible is crystal clear.

There are five passage which are absolutely unmistakable. In Genesis, chapter 19, in the story of Sodom. Moses makes it crystal clear that homosexual activity, all of it is wrong. In Judges, we're told in the story of Gibeah, chapter 19, in no uncertain terms that homosexuality is wrong. Moses, thirdly, in Leviticus 18 and in Leviticus 20 makes it absolutely clear that homosexuality is wrong. In fact, the language that Paul is using here in Romans 1 is pulled right out of the Greek translation of Leviticus 18 and Leviticus 20. Here in this passage today, as Paul describes decadent pagan societal practice, he again makes it clear that homosexuality is wrong. And then when you get to I Timothy 2, or I Corinthians 6 in that list of sins that will keep you out of the kingdom of heaven, homosexuality is once again mentioned, indicating once again that the Bible is unequivocal in its condemnation of homosexual practice.

Now why has Paul picked this out? He's picked it out because of the seriousness of sin. He singles this sin out precisely because it is an example of the human heart working against reason, working against Scripture, working against nature. Listen to what Murray says: "Paul's stress falls upon the unnatural character of the vice, and in that, as also in verse 27 consists the peculiar gravity of the abomination. The implication is that however grievous is fornication or adultery the desecration involved in homosexuality is on a lower plane of degeneracy; it is unnatural and therefore evinces a perversion more basic." The apostle Paul is saying, you want to see evidence of the power of sin unchecked? I give you female homosexuality. Even his phrase can be translated, even their women. Hodge comments that women are always the last ones to be swept under in pervasive societal moral degradation. Paul says, look, even your women have fallen prey to this. Paul says, I know that this is more prevalent amongst men than women, but the fact that even your women, upper-class women, educated women, women who know better than this had fallen into this practice. He said that's an evidence of how pervasive sin is in your society. Paul is telling us here what can happen when sin unchecked by God's grace is afoot in a society. It leads literally to inhuman deeds. Chrysostom said, "When God abandons a person to his own devices, everything is turned upside down." And Jim Philips says that, "Paul's point in elaborating on the consequences of the revolt against God is not merely to speak of the depravity and the degeneration of God as inviting God's anger, but particularly to assert that these are the indisputable

evidences of that anger being visited upon the heathen world." Paul is proving why we are under God's wrath.

III. God judges sin by sin: this is seen, for instance, in the completely unnatural practice of sodomy.

He is showing the evidence that we are under God's wrath, and he's saying therefore you need grace. Then he goes through example number two in verse 27. He goes to male homosexuality. And again he sees this sin as God's judgment against itself. God's judgment against sin is sin, and we see it again in the completely unnatural practice of male homosexuality. And I'd like you to see three phrases in particular. The phrase "indecent acts," the phrase "due penalty," and the phrase "in their own persons."

Paul in condemning male homosexuality is not just condemning kinds of male homosexuality, he's condemning all of it. Oftentimes you will hear people say well, what Paul is condemning is heterosexuals acting like homosexuals. What Paul is condemning is pederasty. Very common in the Greco Roman world where an older man would attach himself to a young boy, and they would carry out a homosexual relationship. True, but that's not everything that Paul is condemning. Paul is condemning all types of homosexual activity. You see it in the phrase "indecent acts," and you see it in the word that he uses for homosexuality. It's the word that comes from Leviticus 18 and Leviticus 20, and Moses describes it simply as this – man sleeping with man, man relating sexually to man. Period. All of it is out, according to the apostle Paul. And so Paul rules out all homosexuality. That's seen in his vocabulary and the indictment of Moses and Leviticus.

Notice also the phrase "due penalty." Paul says here that these persons receive the due penalty of their error. In other words, the penalty for their sin is not simply a natural consequence, it is the deliberately ordered decree of God and punishment against wickedness. In other words, God will not allow His created order to be so violated without just punishment. And so when we see the penalty of sin visited, it's not just something that happens. It's not just people suffering the consequences of their own sin, it's not just inevitable consequences of the law of cause and effect, it is God's own judgment.

And then notice the phrase, "In their own persons." This penalty, Paul says, is a result, not simply of the behavior of the person, it's not just the physical or psychological or medical consequence that's the due penalty that they receive in their own bodies. The behavior itself is God's judgment. It's not just, "Okay, well if we live this way then God's judgment will come." That may be true, it often is. But Paul is saying the behavior itself is evidence of God's judgment. Paul here views the sexual perversion itself as its own punishment.

And that raises the issue of AIDS and all the other various sexually transmitted diseases associated with homosexuality. We often say things like well, AIDS is the penalty for homosexuality or these sexually transmitted diseases are the penalty of homosexuality. Well that may be providentially true in terms of the visitation of the wrath of God, but that's not Paul's point here. Paul's point here is it's not that something else that happens after you do this is God's punishment, it's the perversion itself is God's punishment from a heart that is filled with impure desires. Paul is picking out male homosexuality, not because it's an unforgivable sin, but because it is indisputable proof of just how far humans are able to go if they are unchecked by the grace of God.

I want to stop right now and say there may be folks in the congregation that are struggling with homosexuality in various ways. You may have loved ones who are wrestling with this. I don't want to be misunderstood here. It is not unloving to condemn homosexuality. God does not accept any of us as we are. He does something better than that. He accepts us in spite of who we are. And then by His grace, He makes us into what we are not. And every single believer in here knows that experience. Look, the apostle Paul who wrote this book was a murderer, and God by his grace saved him. Paul did not have the experience of Jesus' coming to Him, saying Paul I embrace you in your murderous lifestyle, I love you as you are, just go right ahead murdering people. Jesus loved Paul too much to do that. And believers love those who are practicing this particular sin too much to say go ahead and do that. I mean would you say to a friend, go ahead and live a lifestyle that is going to lead you to a significantly decreased likelihood of establishing or preserving a successful marriage which is going to lead you to a twenty-five to thirty-year decrease in life expectancy, which is going to leave you open to chronic potentially fatal liver disease, infectious hepatitis, which increases the risk of liver cancer. Go ahead and live in a way that is going to leave you open to an inevitably fatal immune disease and associated cancers, that is going to leave you open to frequently fatal rectal cancer and multiple bowel and other infectious diseases, and a higher than usual rate of suicide and a low likelihood that its adverse affects can be eliminated unless the condition itself is, and at least a fifty percent chance of dying in a group under enormous medical expense over a period of time and treatments that are utterly ineffective in reversing the disease. Is that loving for me to say, "Oh, go ahead and live that way." I don't think so. It's the most loving thing in the world to say, "That's wrong, and it will destroy you. I love you with all my heart, and that is not the way that God intended you to go." It is precisely because of our love and precisely because of our confidence in the gospel that we say 'no' to homosexuality. It's not the only sin in the world. It's not the wickedest sin in the world; but it is a sin, and it is an evidence of why we need grace.

And look, Paul's two big points in this whole passage that he desires to press home are these. First, that we are sinners. Notice his illustration of homosexuality is just that. Paul's main point in the passage is not to attack homosexuality, it's to use it as an illustration that all of us are sinners and need grace.

But Paul's second point, and this is his ultimate point, is that his gospel is so great that it can even transform those who have become locked into the death grip of this particular sexual perversion. You don't believe me? Turn with me for a second to I Corinthians, chapter 6, verses 9 through 11 and see what Paul says there. It's interesting isn't it, Paul is writing to the Romans from Corinth with the Corinthian behavior patterns in his background, and when he writes to the Corinthians, he's writing to a congregation, many people who have come right out of the milieu of the Corinthian behavior patterns. And he says this in I Corinthians 6, beginning in verse 9: "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived, neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God."

But he doesn't end there. "Such were some of you; but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of God." The apostle Paul is saying to the Corinthian Christians, "Some of you were living that way. But my gospel is so grand that there is no one that is beyond the pale of its power to transform. The good news of the Lord Jesus Christ is that the gospel can transform you no matter what." The apostle is saying, not that this sin is so horrible, or it's beyond even the grace of God. He's saying, oh, no, this is an example of the kind of sin that my gospel can utterly eradicate and transform.

You know I was talking with one of our African American brothers who is a minister in this city, and he said, "You know, I've never seen someone on crack cocaine kick it without being converted." It's amazing isn't it, the power of the gospel in the human life. The apostle Paul is saying don't ever underestimate the transforming power of the gospel of grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, because it can change anything. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we pray that even as we take seriously Your indictment against sin, we would take seriously the grace of the gospel; that we would recognize that the gospel is the power of God to salvation. And that power can transform anything, even us. We ask these things in Jesus' name, Amen.

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