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The Great Exchange

Today I have titled the sermon *The Great Exchange*. Normally the great exchange has been an expression used of the transaction that occurs at the moment someone has faith and undergoes the new birth. Today I will use the expression for the exchange that occurs when a person exchanges the worship of the Creator for the creation. Therefore it is not a great exchange in the good sense but in the horrible sense, in the sense that a great thing, the worship of the Creator, is exchanged for a lesser thing, the worship of the creation. This is something that all men do and it is an inevitable thing we do until God interferes with our false worship and draws us to Himself.

To get up to speed, last time in Romans 1 we declared that there is no possibility that God does not exist, meaning, the only valid argument for the existence of God is *the impossibility of the contrary*. This argument states that if the God of the Bible did not exist then the preconditions for life as they are would not exist. In other words, He is necessary to give an adequate explanation of this world; its creatures, its morals, its ethics, its laws, etc...Therefore, it is impossible that God does not exist. I hope you saw from the examples we gave that no unbelieving worldview has any answers and the Christian worldview has all the answers. This is not to boast. It is simply to say that God has done what He has said He has done and He has given us a life and worldview, a way of thinking that is coherent and the only coherent explanation for reality. If we have this understanding it is simply because God is gracious and He has revealed it to us. We give thanks to Him for any and all understanding we might have. For if we were left to ourselves we would have no understanding. We would be fumbling around in the futility of our minds searching for another idol to satisfy the eternity He has set in our hearts, without hope. But by God's grace we have come to faith in Jesus

Christ, and therefore we are what we are and we know what we know because He has taught us by His Spirit.

And I hope that His grace affects you to the point that you realize the horror of the lost man. To understand that the lost man is not ignorant but willfully ignorant; to understand that he knows God, the one and true God, but He does not acknowledge Him as God or give thanks but suppresses Him in unrighteousness. It's this willful suppression that is one of the many reasons he is under the just condemnation of God. But if we can understand what is happening within his thinking, then by the grace of God we can be used as instruments of righteousness to interfere in his thinking so that we can construct an apologetic used by the Holy Spirit to draw that man to salvation so that he might be set free. It is critical, or so Paul thinks, to realize the fallen man's dilemma because when it is understood we appreciate our salvation all the more.

There is no excuse for an unbeliever, they ought to all worship and serve God. But the end of verse 20 implies that he does not worship and serve God and it says that he has no excuse. In verse 21, why do they have no excuse? **For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks.** Verse 21 is causally related in the language to the end of verse 20. It gives the reason they have no excuse. They **knew** Him but they did not **honor Him as God or give thanks.** How did they know Him? Through creation, for God made it evident to them, through what has been made they saw Him clearly. But in what sense did they know Him as God? The participle **knew** is from *γινωσκω* and means "to arrive at a knowledge" of someone. In other words there was time when they were in the process of coming to this knowledge. So then the valid question is raised, when does a person come to the knowledge of God? Probably when they come to the age of accountability. There is no specific age, of course, but it is the time when a person is acquiring an adequate use of language and conscience. Language because language is required to think and conscience because conscience is required to serve as an inner judge for what is right and wrong. As a person develops language and conscience they are able to think about the world around them and at some point in this process they know God. This is what Paul means when he says **they knew God.** He means they arrived at knowledge of Him. This means that at some time in life every human has a crystal clear image of God.

But what happened Paul says was **they did not honor Him as God or give thanks**. Two things that were obviously due Him when they arrived at knowledge of Him they did not do but instead they made a great exchange. That exchange is mentioned in verse 23 and in short what verse 23 is describing is that they exchanged the clear image of God for a distorted image; the Creator for the creature; the true God for an idol. An idol, in this context, is an image in a person's mind that gives an account for or an explanation for the origin of the universe and the sustenance of the universe. In many cultures the image is a god or gods. In others it is not. Just know then that when you talk to people they may or may not talk about god, they may claim to believe or not believe in god or gods. They may use terms like a higher being or a supreme being or force or Allah or even Jehovah, but that does not mean they are talking about the God of the Bible. They may be talking about an image in their thought. You have to probe a little further to find out what kind of attributes this being possesses. Is he or she personal or impersonal? Etc.... etc... What Paul is saying is that everyone has an image of god but originally they had a true image of God and then distorted it into a god of their foolish imagination. So their concept of god may approximate closely the God of the Bible or not but whatever god it is they knew the true God at one time but now they no longer know Him because they have distorted Him. That's why Paul uses the aorist tense in verse 21, to say that they once **knew** Him, not that they now know Him. They knew Him truly once but verse 18 explains that they didn't like that knowledge so they suppressed it.

As a Christian, our responsibility is to remind them of the God they once **knew**. We are ambassadors for Christ. We cannot be so naïve as to think that just because people use god-talk that means they are talking about the God of the Bible. When Paul talked to the Athenians in Acts 17 they had many gods, they even had a statue to an unknown God. Paul says I declare this God to you. Paul picked up a relic truth of a God they had once known but suppressed so far that He was unknown and set out to remind them of this God. Today we will see that this phenomena of a God once known is not confined to Athens but is found in every tribe and culture of the world!

Before we do so, in verse 21 let's look at the two things they did not do when they arrived at knowledge of God. Two things that they should have done.

First, **they did not honor Him as God.** The Greek word for **honor** is *δοξαζω* and is usually translated “glorify.” The same root word is used in verse 23 for what the exchanged of the glory of God for an image. Here Paul is setting forth that they did not glorify God as God. Instead they glorified the creation. They transferred the glory that belongs to God to the creation.

Now when we glorify or honor someone what has happened is they have influenced us to think of them more highly, to esteem them. What Paul is saying is that God has influenced men to think of Him very highly but they did not think of Him highly. It should have been natural to esteem Him but they did not. This is a failure to live up to what we should have done. Men should esteem Him very highly at the moment they arrive at knowledge of Him through creation. But, we do not. Why? The reason is not set forth here but Paul does set it forth in Romans 5:12 we actively participated in the sin of Adam and we have a sin nature. It’s the sin nature which, when we arrive at knowledge of Him, turns us aside from glorifying Him.

Second, **they did not...give thanks.** The Greek word for **give thanks** is *ευχαριστεω* and means “to express appreciation.” When we look at the creation everything that exists has been given to us by God. We should give thanks for all things. Think of how natural it is for you to give thanks and you will know how natural it is for an unbeliever to not give thanks. Let’s think of this in terms of verse 19, that which is evident within us, and verse 20, that which is understood through what has been made outside of us. First in man and his composition. What is man? What is a human? A human is a body and a spirit together which combined forms a human soul. For this we ought to give thanks to God. He created us. We can look at man’s body. We have a physical anatomy; the parts of our body, and a physiology, how the parts work. Each and every part works in conjunction with the other parts. Of course, since the Fall our bodies are fallen and so they are not working optimally and they do wear out and eventually fail. So this is not the way our bodies were originally created but they are still amazing. There is an inevitable knowledge of God that all men arrive at when they contemplate their human body. As David said, “I am fearfully and wonderfully made, my soul knows it very well.” Everyone’s soul knows it very well. It is general revelation.

This knowledge does not require microscopes to see the intricacies of the human cell, it is known by the unaided eye. What the microscope does is reveal even more knowledge of God to those who have access because through it they see a world of complexities beyond human comprehension. But whether with or without a microscope when we contemplate the human body we should “express appreciation” to God. It is a duty, a responsibility, but Paul says men do not express that appreciation.

Second, we can look at man’s spirit. We have a spiritual anatomy, the parts of the human spirit, and their physiology, how the parts work. The spirit includes things like the mind, the will and the conscience. Because of the spirit we can think, judge and make decisions. We are so very unlike animals. There are sometimes similarities but there is an uncross-able chasm between man and animals. Because of this we arrive at an inevitable knowledge of God. This knowledge is seen clearly even though the human spirit is invisible. It immediately speaks to us of the power and knowledge of God in constructing us in His image as a body/spirit/soul complex. All men came to know this very well and should have expressed thanks to God but Paul says they do not give thanks to God.

Not only did they know God very well through man himself, but verse 20 says they knew Him through what He has made outside of man. We have the principle that you know a craftsman from the craft that the craftsman crafts. When we look at nature we see it was designed by an amazing God. Of course, again, there are places where there is mal-design or something is to be desired, but this is because we have human sin. God cursed the world of nature because of our sin in Adam. It is not there because of His original design but our sin. And yet the colors of the peacock, the uniqueness of each star, the behavior of fish, etc...inevitably give knowledge to all men of the one true God. And what is our proper response? To honor Him, to give thanks. But Paul says in verse 21 they neither honor Him as God nor give thanks but instead do something else.

Now the **but** is *αλλα*, a rather strong contrast. Instead of giving honor or thanks **they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.** Two things happened here. In both, the grammar is very interesting because the verbs are not active but passive. In other words, they did not actively cause the futility or darkening but it was an effect of

their failure to honor Him and give thanks. I take these two expressions as Hebrew parallelism; I think both expressions basically mean the same thing and they amount to this; something went horribly wrong in their thinking.

The first one, **they became futile in their speculations**. **Futile** means “rendered worthless” and **speculations** refers to “the process of reasoning.” Paul is saying that their thinking processes were rendered worthless. We’d say they paid a price in their mentality and they aren’t thinking correctly. They grew up and arrived at a knowledge of God and then at that point in time they did not honor Him as God or give thanks and so their minds were rendered futile at that time.

This is how a person becomes insane. When a person does not do as they should do then it contributes to the condition known as insanity. When we say insane we mean a mental disorder. And there are mental disorders that are the effect of not giving thanks to God. We would not classify all mental disorders as due to not giving thanks, some are due to physical damage to the human faculties, but some are due to people not giving thanks to God. They just refuse to do what they should do and honor and give thanks to Him. Their mental problem is a spiritual problem and as a consequence they begin to think in very strange ways and eventually act with very strange behaviors. The norm and standard is for a person to give thanks to God and to esteem Him highly as the God of creation. That is normal.

The second one, **and their foolish heart was darkened** is literally, “and became darkened in their foolish heart.” Again, this is an effect, the cause of which is their failure, when they arrived at the knowledge of God to give glory and thanks. It is a metaphorical way of describing what happens to the heart, which in this case is the mind. Technically the heart is the “center and source of the whole inner life, with its thinking, feeling, and volition.” Paul describes it as foolish for not glorifying and thanking God. Therefore the heart became **darkened**. When you see the word dark what do you think? Loss of perception. Dark is a figurative description of what happens to the perceptive abilities of an individual; their spiritual and moral compass loses its calibration; they begin to reach out into spiritual places that are strange and because of it their morality begins to lapse.

I want to take an aside on verse 21 to make three applications. First, this is one of the verses that indicates to me how critical it is to train children at an early age. God is working to develop their language and conscience so that as they observe the world and themselves they see Him and at some time their circuitry is developed so they see Him clearly and you already want to have been talking about God and His creation, man and the Fall; these are crucial to setting the stage for them to believe the gospel. Because when they first see Him clearly if they don't honor Him as God or give thanks then their circuitry begins to deteriorate and their thinking processes become increasingly flawed as time goes on, and it becomes harder and harder to break through the suppression. So you want to be working with them from a very early age.

Second, there is no one who is not religious. Man was created to worship and worship he will. This worship may be directed toward the one true God or it may be directed toward an idol. But if he rejects God then he will immediately fill that void with another object of his devotion. Murray says, "The mind of man is never a religious vacuum; if there is the absence of the true, there is always the presence of the false." This is signified by the strong contrast of verse 20. They did not honor Him as God and give thanks but became futile in their reasonings. No one is neutral, all men worship, the only issue is what one worships; the Creator or the creation.

Third, there is no one who has never heard, so to speak. All men, both individually and historically, start with knowledge of the one true God and then turn to other gods. In Acts 17 the Athenians started out with the true knowledge of God. But by suppression lost that knowledge to the point that they had a statue that was dedicated to "the unknown God." Put another way, all men start as monotheists and they become polytheists. This is the complete opposite of the evolutionary reconstruction of the history of religious thought. Evolution claims that as man evolved from lower to higher so his religious thought evolved from lower to higher. Therefore the evolutionary interpretation is that religion has evolved from lower polytheism to the higher, more refined monotheism. Jerry Bain taught this section a few years ago right from this pulpit. His lesson was called *The Devolution of Man*. In that lesson he said what I am saying, man naturally devolves in his thought, meaning man is not on a path of upward development toward God but a path of downward development away from Him. He starts with God and plunges

into idolatry. As Meyer says, “For heathenism is not the primeval religion, from which man might gradually have risen to the knowledge of the true God, but is, on the contrary, the result of a falling away from the known original revelation of the true God in His works.” Man started with monotheism and devolved into polytheism. Studies of tribal cultures from around the world reveal the same patterns; always there are stories embedded in these cultures which show an ancient belief in that culture of one true God. Don Richardson, in his book *Eternity in Their Hearts*, reports that when missionaries first went into China and Korea they found that the Chinese had an ancient name for “the Lord of Heaven,” Shang Ti and the Koreans likewise had an ancient name for “the Great One,” Hananim. These names pre-date Christian missionaries as well as other religious beliefs like Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. The traditions date back to the time of the Flood. However, over time the worship of Shang Ti and Hananim was for various reasons cut off from the people and reserved for the Emperor. This left a vacuum in the souls of people because man was made to worship. This vacuum was quickly filled by Confucianism, but this didn’t satisfy many people and so Taoism was introduced, but this didn’t satisfy many people either, finally Buddhism was introduced and it did more to satisfy people because it was wide enough to embrace a number of beliefs people already held. Hundreds of years later when Roman Catholic missionaries went into these cultures they heard of Shang Ti and Hananim but the people did not know much about Him. The Roman Catholics erroneously assumed that since they were the first missionaries then these people had never heard of the one true God. Therefore Shang Ti, the Lord of Heaven and Hananim, the Great One, could not be their names for the one true God that had long been forgotten. So instead of identifying the one true God with these names they created new names. These new names had no connection with the Chinese and Koreans and so very few followed them. Later, Protestant missionaries arrived and wrangled among themselves whether to use Shang Ti and Hananim as names for the one true God. Some decided not to use these names and had similar results as the Roman Catholics. Others decided to use the ancient names and simply reminded them of what Shang Ti and Hananim were like. The result in South Korea was a gospel explosion. It simply was not true that these people groups had never heard of the one true God, from the time of Noah they had, their people descended from the sons of Noah, their people were originally monotheists, but over time the one true God was suppressed and they adopted the polytheism of Buddhism. They

knew the name of God but they didn't know much about Him. When the missionaries came and explained who He was then they were immediately excited that there were others who knew the same God. People seem to connect that with the idea that if there is a God then He is the God of all men and therefore other people, tribes and cultures will have vestiges of this same God under different names. Richardson goes on to recount other stories of missionaries entering cultures and discovering ancient vestiges of truth in their stories and folklore concerning the one true God.

Missionaries, when entering a culture, rather than assuming they have never heard of the one true God, should be wise unto the Scriptures and comb through their ancient beliefs and traditions for vestiges of belief in the one true God so they can use them as a link and bring them up to speed with more details about who this God is and what He has done in His Son. Paul was doing this very thing at Athens and we can support missionaries who do the same thing. The truth is there is no people group on earth who has not known God. They have known Him, but they have buried what they knew of Him. Through missions we can reach out to them by supporting missionaries who reach back to that knowledge.

Intellectually, in verse 22 **Professing to be wise, they became fools**. The participle **professing** is an active voice, it means to assert something, to claim something, in other words, they are the originators of this claim. What claim? That they are **wise**. There are two kinds of wisdom; the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world. Here they claimed to have the wisdom of the world, they claimed to be the intellectually elite. Paul said three things of this elitist wisdom in 1 Cor 1. First, that the world through its wisdom did not come to know God. That is, the wisdom of the world does not lead to God, it does not lead to the truth, it leads away from God and the truth. Second, the wisdom of the world is foolishness to God. Ultimately it is not really wisdom at all but insanity. Third, God will destroy the wisdom of the wise. Ultimately no vestige of worldly wisdom will remain. When Christ returns he will destroy all heathen philosophies because they are sourced in darkened, foolish hearts.

Instead of actually being wise in the godly sense **they became fools**. It is a very sad, sad picture of man but it is critical to realize that there are consequences for man's actions. We cannot be free from the consequences of

our actions. If we decide not to glorify and thank God one consequence is that we become a fool. The word **fool** means to make a show of folly of themselves because, as verse 23 will show, they do a very foolish thing and start to worship the corruptible creation.

When Israel went in at the Conquest under Joshua they were to totally destroy all pagan people out of their land. The rules of holy war implemented uniquely for that period serve as a fore view of God's final judgment. The idols needed to be removed because they have no place in the kingdom of God and if allowed to remain would teach God's people to worship idols. When they did not complete the Conquest, they began to make idols and eventually God disciplined them by sending them into Exile. They were cast into Babylon, the very heart of idolatry in order to teach them the consequences of worshipping idols. God gave a satire on the foolishness of idolatry in Jeremiah 11. He warns, "Do not learn the way of the nations...For the customs of the peoples are delusion; Because it is wood cut from the forest, The work of the hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool. 4They decorate it with silver and with gold; They fasten it with nails and with hammers So that it will not totter. 5Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field are they, And they cannot speak; They must be carried, Because they cannot walk!" In other words, they are crafting idols out of wood and can the wood speak? Can the wood move? No. And yet they worship it as a god. They are gods fashioned by the sinful, darkened mind of man. "Do not fear them" God says, "For they can do no harm, Nor can they do any good. 6There is none like You, O LORD; You are great, and great is Your name in might. 7Who would not fear You, O King of the nations? Indeed it is Your due! For among all the wise men of the nations And in all their kingdoms. There is none like You. 8But they are altogether stupid and foolish In their discipline of delusion—their idol is wood!" God is saying it is stupid and foolish to worship some part of creation; it's just silly but that's a consequence of rejecting Him. Verse 9, "Beaten silver is brought from Tarshish, And gold from Uphaz, The work of a craftsman and of the hands of a goldsmith. Violet and purple are their clothing; They are all the work of skilled men." In other words, idols can be made to look very beautiful, but they are base and corrupt. Verse 10, "But the LORD is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King. At His wrath the earth quakes, And the nations cannot endure His indignation." In other words, we should not forget that idolatry will not go unjudged. Thus God says to Isaiah to tell the Israelites, "Thus you shall say to them, "The

gods that did not make the heavens and the earth will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.” ¹²*It is* He who made the earth by His power, Who established the world by His wisdom; And by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens. ¹³When He utters His voice, *there is* a tumult of waters in the heavens, And He causes the clouds to ascend from the end of the earth; He makes lightning for the rain, And brings out the wind from His storehouses. ¹⁴Every man is stupid, devoid of knowledge; Every goldsmith is put to shame by his idols; For his molten images are deceitful, And there is no breath in them. ¹⁵They are worthless, a work of mockery; In the time of their punishment they will perish. ¹⁶The portion of Jacob is not like these; For the Maker of all is He, And Israel is the tribe of His inheritance; The LORD of hosts is His name.” Idolatry may be manifested by making objects of wood or gold or silver but they may just as easily in our modern day be belief systems about the upward development of life from non-life and imprinted on the geologic column. Idolatry is not about the external objects, it is about the darkened thought processes going on in the human mind expressed in art, science, mathematics. It controls as a predisposed bias toward conclusions that are contrary to God, that shield them from God. These alternative explanations for origins and development are foolishness. Professing to be wise they become fools.

John Calvin said the human heart was an idol factory, it keeps pumping out idol after idol after idol, it is like an assembly line that produces idols too innumerable to count. Verse 23 explains the great exchange that results in the fashioning of idols. **And exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.** Note the word **exchange**, this was an active **exchange**. There’s culpability here, they are doing this on purpose, in fact, I would say we all do this on purpose unless there’s intervention. That’s why we should work with our children from a very young age. God, who’s God? He’s the creator. What did He make? The birds, the dogs, the trees, the land...boom, boom, boom you’re just hitting them with these truth because you know that because of Romans 5:12 and the sin nature, the natural thing to do is to make this exchange and worship and serve the creature more than the Creator; to look down and try to find their identity rather than up. We are all sinners in the hands of an angry God, says Jonathan Edwards. Edward’s is right, verse 18, God is angry. We know

Him but we don't want Him in our knowledge. And we all go this route except for the grace of God intervening in our lives.

In summary, in verse 21 Paul explains why they are without excuse. They arrived at a knowledge of God, but at that moment they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks, but instead they became futile in their reasonings and their foolish minds were darkened. In verse 22, professing to be the intellectually elite, they became fools, rapidly devolving toward insanity. Further, in verse 23, they made the great exchange, the glory of the incorruptible God was exchanged for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Man's mind is by nature an idol factor. They look internally to creation to give an explanation for the world. This is futility.

In conclusion, what can we learn? First, train children from a young age. Start with the basic things like God and His creation and man and his Fall. This is critical because God will make Himself known to them at an early age and it's when they see Him clearly that they do not glorify Him as God or give thanks but instead their reasoning processes become darkened. The sin nature will not glorify God. We can intervene at this critical time to work with their thinking process to prepare them for the gospel. Second, all men are religious, all men worship, no one is neutral, they all have an altar. The human heart was designed to worship and it must have an object of devotion. It may be an eternal universe or it may be the eternal God, but all men worship either the creation or the Creator. Third, there is no one who has never heard. All know Him. God has made Himself known to them. Cultures suppress this knowledge but they maintain a basic, rudimentary knowledge of Him as shown by their ancient traditions and folklore. Instead of asking, what about those who never heard we ought to take it from the mouths of the tribal people. Over and over they ask the missionaries, did your grandfather know these things? Yes. Then why did they not come and tell us. The people needed someone to come and tell them more about this God and His Christ. Thus the missionary endeavor becomes all the more important because they are condemned by creation but they need Christ for salvation.

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