

Sermons through

# Romans

## The Penalty

*Romans 1:26, 27*

*With Study Questions*

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# The Penalty

*Romans 1:26, 27*

**For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. <sup>27</sup> Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due (Romans 1:26, 27).**

## **Introduction**

As we embark upon the PG13 portion of the chapter I am mindful of the Apostle Paul's exhortation:

**Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. <sup>12</sup> For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret (Ephesians 5:11, 12).**

I may, therefore, speak in cryptic terms (using the word "lifestyle"), that parents may afterward translate as they deem fit. Suffice it to say that the behavior Paul highlights as the flagship of "**impurity**" and the "**dishonoring**" of the body (Romans 1:24) is currently slung at young and old in every conceivable venue imaginable in the panorama of western culture.

We should not, however, view ourselves as unique in this. The original audience of Paul would have had a very similar experience – the lifestyle accompanied the fall of Greece and Rome. R. H. Mounce observes:

...the Greco-Roman society of Paul's day tolerated (the lifestyle) homosexuality with considerable ease.<sup>1</sup>

H. Rhys says that Aristophanes found (the lifestyle) homosexuality "sufficiently widespread in Athens to say in one

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<sup>1</sup> Mounce, R. H. (1995). *Vol. 27: Romans*. The New American Commentary (82). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

of his comedies that the audience contained a clear majority of (those who engaged in the lifestyle) sodomites.<sup>2</sup>

Among some advocates it was viewed as superior to heterosexuality. Barclay notes that “fourteen out of the first fifteen Roman Emperors were (engaged in the lifestyle) homosexuals.”<sup>3</sup>

M. Hunter quotes Suetonius’s remark that Julius Caesar was “every woman’s man and every man’s woman” (*The Epistle to the Romans*, TBC [London: SCM, 1955], 33). Cf. Plato’s *Symposium* and Plutarch’s *Lycurgus* on homosexuality in ancient times.<sup>4</sup>

All this to say that the cultural fracas surrounding this topic is nothing new. On the contrary the observance of the lifestyle in question affirms what the apostle is teaching in this passage – that it is the inevitable outcome of apostasy (the rejection of God).

Though a hot topic, I don’t intend to spend an undue amount of time addressing the lifestyle. I am hoping to remain true to the text and its primary message. But since it has become, not merely a sociological/cultural/political battle, but a matter of ecclesiastical concern (many churches having sanctioned the lifestyle), I think a few comments and observations are necessary.

First, over and against some modern expositors, the lifestyle is perspicuously unbiblical. The passage before us is not unclear on the matter and is not addressing some unacceptable variation of the lifestyle (as some insert without warrant) but the lifestyle itself. Other passages with affirm that same are:

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<sup>2</sup> Mounce, R. H. (1995). *Vol. 27: Romans*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>3</sup> Mounce, R. H. (1995). *Vol. 27: Romans*. The New American Commentary (82). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>4</sup> Mounce, R. H. (1995). *Vol. 27: Romans*. The New American Commentary. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

**You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination (Leviticus 18:22).**

**If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination (Leviticus 20:13).**

**Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice (the lifestyle) homosexuality,<sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 6:9, 10).**

Paul also lists it among those who are unholy and profane...

**...for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers,<sup>10</sup> the sexually immoral, men who practice (the lifestyle) homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine,<sup>11</sup> in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted (1 Timothy 1:9-11).**

The Scriptures are neither silent nor unclear on the matter. But this does bring up other questions. For example, I received this question after last week's message regarding the way people are born:

Question:

Hello sir, I had a couple questions regarding your sermon on Sunday. Listening to it, I became a bit confused as to your view of (the lifestyle) homosexuality. So, what precisely is your view? It goes without saying that way of living is wrong, but I wondered, do you think people can be born that way?

I answered:

Answer:

Humanity is a fallen, sin-laden race and we are born with various desires and/or we may acquire various desires as we

grow.

"Yet man is born into trouble, as the sparks fly upward" (Job 5:7)

Some of these desires may be attached to our biological make-up, some may be psychological. My point is that ethics must transcend human desire since both our physical and psychological make-up are subject to the fall. In short, whether or not someone is born with strong (lifestyle) homosexual desires is moot. For example, if I am born with a strong (even overwhelming) desire to do violence, that desire must be overcome or somehow restrained. We certainly shouldn't redefine our ethics to accommodate our strong passions. That man "comes forth from the womb speaking lies" (Ps. 58:3) does not justify lying.

None of this means we should be insensitive to the difficulties and struggles people have with their desires. It also doesn't mean we should be unnecessarily mean or incendiary. Many of us have friends who engage in the lifestyle who we love and care about. One evening I managed to write a list of more than ten close friends engaging in the lifestyle have died due to a disease commonly associated with it. More to the point is that we don't establish ethics via human passions.

There is also a very common argument people make, asserting that it is just nobody's business what other people do and there is essentially no harm that will befall a culture who sanctions the lifestyle. If I may take a few minutes to read a column I wrote on the subject in March of 2008 as a brief apologetic for what has come to be called a "traditional household."

Heated discussion in the State Supreme Court regarding the constitutionality of Proposition 22 (the one man, one woman marriage bill passed in 2000), reinvigorates the question: Why is the Christian right so concerned about what others do in private? And it's not merely (the lifestyle) homosexuality.

At the risk of sounding self-deprecating, I confess that Christendom is extremely narrow in painting the boundaries of amorous: no premarital, no extramarital, no incestuous, no pedophilia, no gay, no lesbian, no bisexual, no polyamorous, no trans-sexual, no bigamy or polygamy, no necrophilia, no bestiality, no prostitution. According to Christians, it's mom, dad, junior and sis. Departing from that is simply wrong and should not be sanctioned.

The Christian right opposes the type of liberty necessary for these multi-variegated sexual preferences to flourish and are, therefore, viewed as a bigoted lot. Our culture comforts itself by assigning them with a psychological disorder and then hoping they'll go away. But that doesn't seem to be happening. Are Christians truly bigots or are there good reasons for their narrow view of what should constitute a household?

Reasons to oppose divergent unions should not be founded upon ignorance, anger, hatred, self-righteousness, psychosis or simply because people think it's yucky. After twenty-five years of ministry, I've seen all these ugly dispositions in the church. It's carnal indignation and it's wrong. But there are good reasons for the exclusive 'mom and dad' criterion.

As a Christian, I believe the declaration of Scripture (which clearly addresses the subject in question) is sufficient to arrive at an ethical conclusion. But it is a mistake to think the ethics of Scripture are arbitrary – as if man would be happy if God would just leave him alone. No one knows man like God knows man. And no human counsel can elevate the soul and culture of man, like the wisdom found in God's word.

A biblical apologetic for the traditional household:

At creation God declared that one thing, and only one thing wasn't good – it wasn't good for man to be alone. Biblical anthropology suggests something incomplete in a single gender. The simple nature of the case is that there are two genders. These two genders are interdependent, that is, they

can't survive without each other. Men and women were engineered by God in such a way as to produce life. But these physical life-giving distinctions are not the end of it. Men and women are emotionally and psychologically distinct as well. Interests and temperament between the sexes is universally divergent. And regardless of what examples one uses to demonstrate gender distinctions, it is virtually impossible for any rational person to ignore that they exist.

One reason Christians push for the traditional family is due (or at least should be due) to the recognition of gender distinctions and how they work together augmenting the spiritual and psychological well-being of children and culture. A household which contains the necessary components to produce healthy, happy and well-balanced offspring is a household comprised of a mom and dad. To publicly promote a model which purposefully ignores or excludes this does harm to households and the societies which households produce – it therefore becomes a public affair. Prisons are (generally) not comprised of inmates raised by loving moms and dads.

And even if a couple is past the child bearing age, or doesn't intend to have (or adopt) children they still provide a model. An eighty-year-old couple who can no longer have children (even those who never had children) still convey to their culture the substance of what generates a healthy psyche. They are still the archetypal standard of an ideal home.

It is occasionally argued that this ideal may become impossible if a parent dies or leaves. But the mere assertion acknowledges that when this happens the ideal has been compromised. It is one thing to fall short of an ideal out of necessity or neglect, it is quite another matter to alter or abandon ideals altogether.

A final explanation, one that is less likely to be embraced by our increasingly apostate culture, is the picture given in Scripture of fathers, mothers, husbands and brides. God calls us to view Him as a Father with the father's attending roles of love, provision and protection. Jesus is compared to a groom who lays down His life for His bride, the church. It can easily

be argued that human roles have, as their primary design, these pedagogical ends.

We can say these are private matters but they inevitably become public and work their way into the fabric of our corporate psyches. After all, if it were truly a private matter it wouldn't at the State Supreme Court.

I realize this has been an extremely long introduction, but I'm seeking to anticipate and answer questions in advance; if there are more we can discuss them in the question and answer afterward. Now to a brief examination of the two verses in question:

**For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature (Romans 1:26)**

### **For This Reason**

In many of these concepts we find Paul either repeating himself or emphasizing what he has already written so I won't labor re-explaining in detail. When Paul writes "**for this reason**" the reason is man's willful suppression of the truth of the knowledge of God and choice to serve and worship the creature rather than the Creator (Romans 1:18-25). What we see in Paul's message is the consequence of the rejection of absolute truth which is necessarily associated with an absolute source of truth who is God Himself.

### **Gave Them Up**

Paul then uses the same word used in verse 24 explaining how God "**gave them up**" *paradoken* meaning to "deliver over or up to the power of someone."<sup>5</sup> Jesus uses the word to describe being handed over to the judge and "**thrown into prison**" (Matthew 5:25) In this case, that someone to whom we are handed over is ourselves. Paul then becomes more specific about what this looks like.

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<sup>5</sup> Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

## Vile Passions

Mankind is given over to “**vile passions**” or “**passions of dishonor**” *pathe atimias*: *Páthos* is the soul’s diseased condition out of which the various lusts spring as distinct from *Epithumía* which is the active lust or desire springing from the diseased soul.<sup>6</sup>

What we’re talking about here is pure carnality – like animals governed by insatiable passions and instincts rather than principle and conviction. It is behavior that is offensive to God and destructive to man. So far from accommodating this behavior, the Scriptures teach that this behavior is to be put to death.

**Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion (*pathos*), evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry (Colossians 3:5).**

## The Exchange

We again see the word “**exchange**” *metellaxan*. We saw variations of this word in verse 23 where the glory of the “**incorruptible God**” is exchanged for “**an image made like corruptible man.**” In verse 25 we read how man “**exchanged the truth about God for a lie.**” We then read in verse 26 how the exchange of the treasures of our heart (who we serve and worship) consequently results in an exchange in “**natural relations for those that are contrary to nature.**”

Paul’s use of the word “**natural**” should not be taken too far – as if we can establish ethics by our observation of the natural world. The word “**natural**” *physiken* means be in according with the basic nature of things – akin to our word ‘normal.’

Paul’s point seems to be that when mankind suppresses and rejects the knowledge of the one true God – along with God’s attending law which is just, holy and good – he will be turned over to a “**debased mind**” (**Romans 1:28**) and his own carnal passions – he will identify this as “**being filled with all unrighteousness**” (**Romans 1:29**). For reasons not identified in the passage, the primary example of this unrighteousness is an

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<sup>6</sup> Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

inordinate and insatiable sexual appetite for one's own gender. This becomes the outward expression – the seal that the exchange has been made.

In many ways the lifestyle is a sin like any other – Paul will certainly complete this chapter with quite a long list – but in many ways it is unique. It is unique in how Sodom and Gomorrah provide an archetype example of a people ripe for judgment (Jude 7), but it is also unique in how aggressively it seeks sanction. One is hard-pressed to find an example of another sin which makes such demands – we see no 'Adulterers or Gossip Pride Day' foisted upon the culture.

**Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due (Romans 1:27).**

### **Intense But Wrong**

Paul now writes of men doing the same. Various reasons have been given as to why he mentions the women then the men but all are merely guesses. The phrase **"burned in their lust"** is a way of expressing an intense, groping desire. One should not underestimate, or be insensitive to, how powerful this drive is and how natural it might feel for those involved. But again, having an intense desire does not mean a certain behavior is not **"shameful"** to use Paul's word. It is quite possible for us, as sinful people, to feel very right about very wrong things!

### **Due Penalty**

What is meant when we read of **"receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due?"** There is a popular misconception that Paul is addressing of some STD. The below explanation is more likely:

Paul is not so much calling for a penalty as thinking of sexual perversion as itself a penalty (being a sinner is the punishment of sin!). This is sharply different from the general attitude

among Greeks and Romans of the day, for they preferred this kind of love to heterosexual love.<sup>7</sup>

W.G.T. Shedd explains it this way:

...the recompense is the gnawing unsatisfied lust itself, together with the dreadful physical and moral consequences of indecency.

### **Closing Thoughts**

What we see in this passage is a highly accurate explanation of the world we observe – this explains things. We should not be surprised or think it strange (1 Peter 4:12). Finally, we must recognize that Paul’s motives here seem to be to establish a level playing field for all humanity, **“for there is no partiality with God” (Romans 2:11)**. Paul is **“eager to preach the gospel” (Romans 1:15)** recognizing that apart from the grace of God this is the lot of all men.

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<sup>7</sup> Morris, L. (1988). *The Epistle to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (93). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

## Questions for Study

1. Is the promotion of homosexuality unique to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries? What about the Apostle Paul's audience (pages 2, 3)?
2. What does the prevalence of this lifestyle reveal about a culture (page 3)?
3. Is homosexuality a biblically acceptable alternative? Why or why not (page 4)?
4. Discuss the merits of the argument that people are born a certain proclivities (pages 4, 5).
5. Should people just mind their own business when it comes to the sanctioning of a homosexual lifestyle in a given culture (pages 5-8)?
6. For what reason does God give people up to vile passions (page 8)?
7. To whom does God give people up? How does that unfold (page 8)?
8. What are vile passions and what are we called to do with them (page 9)?
9. Discuss the various exchanges Paul writes of in verses 23, 25 and 26. What is the final "seal" indication the exchange has been made (pages 8, 9)?
10. Is homosexuality similar or dissimilar to other sins? In what way (page 10)?
11. If a person feels intensely strong about something, does that make it right (page 10)?
12. What is the "due penalty" of the error of which Paul writes (pages 10, 11)?
13. What seems to be Paul's motive in writing these things (page 11)?