

Sermons through

Romans

The Debased Mind

Part 1

Romans 1:28-32

With Study Questions

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And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; ²⁹ being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers, ³⁰ backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, ³¹ undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; ³² who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:28-32).

Introduction

In chapter six the Apostle Paul, having spent a couple of chapters discussing salvation by grace through faith (alone) will ask the rhetorical question:

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound (Romans 6:1)?

He answers with another rhetorical question:

By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it (Romans 6:2)?

Dead to sin? My hair is dying; my eyesight and hearing are in critical condition; my jump is in the morgue; I don't know about you, but sin seems to be very much alive! Paul explains that being dead to sin is a conviction.

He explains our union with Christ – having been baptized “**into his death**” and into His “**resurrection**” (Romans 6:4, 5), “**our old self,**” having been “**crucified**” with him that we would no longer be “**slaves to sin**” (Romans 6:6), we then see the imperative – this command:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions (Romans 6:12).

Paul will push this further in chapter twelve where he call his readers, in light of the mercies of God to present their bodies “ **...as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship (Romans 12:1).**

Again we see the sacrifice – a sacrifice dies. To put it in simple terms, if something is dead to you, you ignore it. You seek to live your life as if it isn't there. You don't visit it; you don't play with it; you don't respond to it. Not to get overly graphic but if someone is dead there is nothing you can do to tempt them. You can't provoke them or present something to entice them. That is how we are to be toward sin.

I mention these things because it becomes all too simple to view Paul's description of humanity in these opening chapters as a profile of hypothetical humanity or humanity outside the church or Christendom. After all he is writing of those who suppress the truth. For Christians, that suppression of truth has been overcome by the grace of God.

But our day-to-day battle rages furiously. The battle of being acquitted before a holy God has been won for all those who are found in Christ, as Paul writes:

...not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Philippians 3:9).

But there is another battle that will not end until the Lord takes us home – the battle of not letting sin “**reign**” (Romans 6:12). So even though the list of sins which Paul writes of in conclusion of this chapter is his description of fallen humanity, we should not think ourselves immune to the temptation of falling into these types of things.

I, therefore, thought it might be profitable to sift through the sinful conduct at the top of Paul's list – what these things are and why/how they are to be avoided. We might take a couple of weeks to do this. But first,

let's take a look at the bookends Paul places on either end of these sins that he lists.

And even as they did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting (Romans 1:28)

who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them (Romans 1:32).

The Natural Man

Paul is writing here, not of the struggling Christian, but the person who lives in rejection of the truth and the God from whom the truth comes. Paul is writing of the natural man who has been given over to a debased mind – who practices evil and gives approval of others who practice evil.

It is this person who should fear for their very soul – it is a not-so-subtle form of self-deification (playing God), where the individual knows better than God. I find myself much more concerned for the strong and confident who boldly – often with a cavalier spirit – revel in sin, than for the struggling sinner who grieves in their own weakness. Heaven forbid this heart be found in the church.

It was found in Corinth:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you (1 Corinthians 5:1, 2).

Even though Paul is writing about the world, we should seek to be savvy enough to see it in our church and in ourselves. As one speaker at our family conference put – the ghost of Adam past; the sin in our own lives which still abides.

Not Retaining God

Paul seems to be repeating in different words what he wrote in Romans 1:18; but instead of saying people suppress the truth, here he writes that they “**did not like to retain God in their knowledge.**” In other words, people do not view the knowledge they have of God (something everyone possesses) as worthwhile. God is not something we see, hear or feel; He is something we know. There is nothing we know with as much certainty and there is nothing we know that is of greater value. But because of sin, we do not like it.

He restates what he wrote in verse 24 where God “**gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts**” with the statement that he “**gave them over to a debased mind.**” “Debased” pertains to not being in accordance with what is right.

Herein lies the great secret – belief in God, convictions driven by Scripture, are continually the object of public ridicule. But some objective, well-defined alternative is seldom, if ever, presented. People generally use hard to define, abstract principles that can be morphed if the occasion demands.

What Paul presents is the true alternative to God – the actual exchange. The individual, the household, the church, the nation and culture that does not “like to retain God in their knowledge” will be at the mercy of a “debased mind” whether corporate or individual.

The debased mind cannot help but gravitate to do things “**which are not fitting;**” things inappropriate. They are out there; they have an appeal but they are like submerged icebergs waiting to shipwreck our lives.

In verse 32 Paul seals the inexcusability of man’s rejection of God and his consequential plummeting into moral darkness and confusion.

Notice that it is not the struggle with sin. The verse is not addressing man’s universal failure to live up to a standard – it’s the rejection of the standard. The verse is addressing what men know, how they don’t care about what they know, and how they are seeking to drag others down with them.

What Men Know

Along with the knowledge that there is a God comes the knowledge that God has **“righteous judgment(s).”** People will often betray their knowledge of God’s just judgments – this nagging awareness that certain things are wrong along with the notion of a reckoning. I recently received this post about a recently deceased person. I think it’s safe to say the person who wrote it is not likely a Christian. Edited a bit, he wrote:

I hope the scumbag piece of dirt chickenhawk predator suffered greatly, died alone and rots in Hell.

This may be a bit extreme but Paul’s point seems to be that all people know there is a God; they know the human conduct that is an offense to God and that it deserves judgment; they don’t care; they make light of it in movies and sit-coms and want to drag as many people to hell with them as they possibly can.

To what extent people can deceive themselves into thinking good is evil and evil good it is difficult to say. Is there a keen awareness in the minds/hearts of people that this (by “this” I mean verse 32) is taking place? The heart can get pretty callous. But it is still a human heart made in the image of God and somewhere, whether deep inside or right on the surface, people know there is a God and that His judgments are righteous. Yet they still engage in actions that are an affront to God. Paul mentions a few:

...being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers (Romans 1:29).

Filled With All Unrighteousness

Paul begins with a sweeping statement, informing us that when God is removed from the cup, only poison remains. Man is **“filled with all unrighteousness.”** The vessel is full of **“all”** or **“all manner”** (ESV) of unrighteousness.” Clearly Paul’s list is not exhaustive. Suffice it to say that there is no corner of the universe that is free from the effects of sin. Total depravity may not mean that people are as evil as they can possibly

be, it does mean that every aspect of humanity has been so infected by sin that even the righteous deeds of man are as a filthy rag before God (Isaiah 64:6). Paul will pursue this more fully in chapter three.

Wickedness

Wickedness is also a somewhat general term with the implication of a motive forming from an evil spirit or intent. Wickedness relates to why you do what you're about to do. We are to do all things to the glory of God – even rest and relaxation. We should ever examine our motives. What motivates somebody is known only to that person and to God – and sometimes only God. I need to truly figure out why I did or am about to do anything.

Covetousness

Covetousness is a desire to have more than one's due. We see in the Tenth Commandment this is often motivated by what someone else has (neighbor's house, wife, servants, etc). Covetousness is distinct from jealousy (sometimes jealousy is appropriate – covetousness never), which is a response to someone taking that which is yours; covetousness is a desire to have that which is not yours. The coveter creates the jealous.

Maliciousness

Maliciousness is similar to wickedness in that it is a word describing one's motivation – something known but to God (and maybe the person). The malicious person desires to cause pain or hurt someone. I was recently speaking with an old friend – a very sweet man. But he is caught up in a legal battle with his neighbors that is bringing out a side in him of which he needs to be aware. He knows he needs to do what is right and, to a certain extent, legally strategic. But, as we seek to be wise and strategic, vindictiveness follows closely in our wake, just waiting to strike.

Malice is a subtle sin. It can surface in our theological discussions in the form of a "gotcha." It's been said of Jesus that He became angry but never malicious. To the natural man, malice becomes an acceptable

disposition and, according to Paul, he encourages others to be malicious as well; for the Christian malice is something to which we must be dead.

A Place for our Failures

We will continue our examination of these behaviors next time, but I would like to conclude with two thoughts: One—let us recognize that Jesus never committed one infraction regarding any of these sins—never one in thought, word or deed was Jesus malicious when face to face with an environment where all humanity would and have failed. Our understanding of Jesus, the righteous should be elevated as we ponder His pure and holy conduct.

Recognizing also, that at various levels, we have all failed in each and every sin of which Paul will write, but the good news is that the righteousness of Christ is freely given to all who, by grace through faith, call upon His name. Let us consider the righteousness of Christ and the graciousness of God's grace as we prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper.

Questions for Study

1. Explain what it means to be dead to sin (pages 2, 3)?
2. In one respect our battle is won, in another it continues. Explain (page 3).
3. How does the natural man engage (perhaps unwittingly) in self-deification (page 4)?
4. Explain what Paul meant when he wrote that man “did not like to retain God in their knowledge” (page 5).
5. Define “debased” (page 5).
6. What is the alternative to the knowledge of God (page 5)?
7. What do all men know (page 6)?
8. Discuss how far unrighteousness reaches (pages 6, 7).
9. Define the following and how one might contend with these sins: wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness.
10. What do we learn about Jesus when we examine a list of sins like this (page 8)?
11. In light of human failure to avoid these sins, what is the good news (page 8)?