

Sermons through

Romans

The Debased Mind

Part 4

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

As we come to the end and Paul's ignominious (shameful) list of human vices let us be reminded that Paul is not merely engaging in moralizing – as if he's fed up with the behavior of his contemporaries and is letting them "have it" via a run-on sentence depicting their corruptions. More to the context, this is Paul's treatise on biblical anthropology (the nature of man) and his desperate need for what only Christ can provide – to be rescued/ransomed from ourselves, the world, the enemy of our souls and the judgment of a Holy God. This speaks strongly to why Paul is "ready/eager to preach the gospel" (Romans 1:15).

But this does not mean that we should view this list as hypothetical. As if it is merely there to inform us of what heaven might look like or to entertain some detached view of ethics, leading us to exhale "Wouldn't it be nice if I wasn't this way, but, oh well it is what it is." We should recognize attributes in ourselves that are an offense to God and, therefore, a violation of all that can be defined as good with any legitimate authority. Then we should make war against those attributes – a lifetime occupation.

We should not think it a small endeavor to seek to be a better person. As an individual, husband, father, pastor I want to be a better person; I want my family to be better people and I desire that those under my

influence and authority as an elder seek to be good people. This list and others like it found in Scripture should aid in both—both a clear marker of what constitutes appropriate human conduct and an irresistible current propelling us to the buoy of Christ and His cross, which God promises will hold us above the waves of His judgment.

If you have not yet called upon the name of Christ, it is my prayer that this list would illuminate your soul to this need. Perhaps you've known the Lord many years—the prayer is the same.

Evil-Mindedness *kakoetheias* (similar to malice)

Paul continues his list, writing of how a rejection of the knowledge of God inevitably leads to “**evil-mindedness.**” Evil minded people aren't always twiddling their moustaches. They may have very warm smiles and pleasant voices. Evil-mindedness is a defect in man's character that leads him to a conscious and intentional effort to be hurtful of others. But it is more than that.

The evil-minded person takes everything with an evil connotation—as if every person in every act has an angle—to be overly suspicious—to view every action in the worse possible light. The evil-minded man has an evil nature and continually suspects others of evil as well.

It is the opposite of Paul's definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13:7 where love “**believes all things**” meaning, according to some, that we seek to take the best and kindest view of all men and circumstances, as long as it is possible to do so. The evil-minded person always thinks others are seeking a dark construction on the event because that is what they would do. Thinking the worst in people aids in them living down to those expectations.

This is not to suggest that we should seek to be lacking in the qualities of wisdom and discernment—we should, as Jesus taught, be “**wise as serpents**” (Matthew 10:16). Living in a world plagued by sin—and being sinners ourselves, it is easy to become jaded, but we should avoid entertaining a disposition of darkness in ourselves and continual suspicion of others.

Whisperers *psithyristes* Backbiters *katalalous*

We then read of “**whisperers**” and “**backbiters.**” The whisperer is someone who gossips, slanders or spreads rumors in secret and the backbiter does the same but with more volume. These sins of the tongue are the source of untold harm but in and out of the church. James writes of the tongue:

**So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by such a small fire!
6 And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell (James 3:5, 6).**

We have within ourselves a very unhealthy desire to say and hear ‘dirt’ on others. (...)

So many issues in life revolve around saying the wrong thing, saying it to the wrong people or saying the wrong way. We comfort ourselves with phrases like “I said it to his face” or “It’s because I’m concerned.” The real question is not whether you’re concerned or even if it’s true. The real question, the one we should ask before we say anything is “Is what I’m about to say edifying to others and honoring to God?”

Interesting that for “whisperer” Paul uses a word found in the Septuagint in Ecclesiastes.

If the serpent bites before it is charmed, there is no advantage to the charmer (Ecclesiastes 10:11).

Juicy dialogue catches people ears and attention. The speaker needs to think twice and the listener may offer the question: “Why do I need to hear this?”

Haters of God *theostygeis*

Paul then writes of “**haters of God.**” Seems like a pretty strong term and most people, even unbelievers, would not designate themselves as

haters of God; although the hatred of God has become in vogue. In a 1985 movie entitled *Agnes of God* Jane Fonda offers the provocative line to a young nun that it is entirely acceptable to “hate God.” Since then I have heard the sentiment uttered by those who either don’t like the ethics of God (often misrepresented ethics) or the calamities that befall them in their lives.

The godless man, like a spoiled child who resents and detests the boundaries established by a wise and loving parent, has repugnance for God and God’s audacity to be the one true God. He also loathes God’s providence and judgments over human events. They see no wisdom in the words of William Penn who wrote: “Men must be governed by God or they will be ruled by tyrants.” Or as the Scriptures declare:

know therefore today, and lay it to your heart, that the Lord is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other (Deuteronomy 4:39)

Do we not see something beyond mere academic displeasure in the words of famous atheist, Richard Dawkins, when he writes of the God in whom he doesn’t believe?

The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.

The next three words, “violent, proud, boasters” concern themselves with some aspect of pride.

Violent *hybristas* Proud *hyperephanous* Boasters *alazonas*

How does violence attached to pride? You’ll notice the Greek word is etymologically related to the English word “hubris.” It means to have a lofty sense of superiority...

...out of which the insolent person treats all others as beneath him. It is the pride that is totally unaware of its limitations and “goes before a fall”.¹

The word is used in the Septuagint in Proverb 6:17 at the top of a list of sins which the Lord hates – a proud or haughty look. We see this type of abuse displayed in children who take pleasure in somehow hurting their inferiors. It is an ugly trait that doesn't altogether disappear with maturity – it just becomes more well-hidden and destructive. We might be reminded at this juncture that merely thinking these things is a sin before God.

The Proud *hyperephanous* has a certain contempt for everyone except oneself. When it comes to ethics they fail to critique their own work. Mary, the mother of Jesus, sang of this in the first chapter of Luke:

He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts (Luke 1:51).

James, on the other hand, presents the biblical axiom:

Therefore it says, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

In a similar vein we see the “boaster” *alazonas*. This word is derived from a word meaning wandering and likely refers to a sort of traveling merchant making sensational claims that cannot be substantiated. The victim finds himself stolen from with a product that can neither heal nor work while the wandering boaster has moved on.

Biblical Christianity is, without doubt, the most highly critiqued system of thought in the history of mankind, yet the Bible continues to be the best-seller and there is no legitimate refutation of this most ‘non-wandering, rock-like message.’ At the same time mankind continually finds himself surrounded by wandering boasters who demand allegiance

¹ Morris, L. (1988). *The Epistle to the Romans*. The Pillar New Testament Commentary (97–98). Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans; Inter-Varsity Press.

in their followers while offering no solid evidence for their audacious claims of what they think might make this world a so-called better place.

Inventors of Evil Things *epheuretas kakon*

With the knowledge of God sufficiently suppressed, as Paul has suggested, man becomes avant-garde in his ungodliness. At the most extreme we may think of the highly intellectual and clever tyrant or despot who has managed to elevate himself to the pinnacle of human power over the bodies of citizens of which he has innovatively disposed.

At a perhaps more subtle level we see religion itself, rather than being built on the rock of God's word and Christ's cross, being an ingenious attempt of man to cater to other men and their felt needs.

We then see an attribute sneak into this list that almost seems out of place – "Disobedient to parents."

Disobedient to Parents *goneusin apeitheis*

Our societal wholesale disregard for the Fifth Commandment tends to make this appear unfit for such a nefarious list. But a lack of willingness to honor and obey parents (as a God-given authority) becomes the germ which leads to the abandonment of respect for authority in general – the darkness of this is augmented when one comes to recognize the sovereignty of God in establishing authority – an issue Paul will address in detail in chapters twelve and thirteen.

This is not to say that parents cannot err, be and engage in great evil. To the extent that a parent, or any authority, seeks to lead those under their care into clear obstructions of counsel of God (revealed in Scripture), they must be dismissed and obedience to the higher authority must take precedent.

Nonetheless, there is nothing more disturbing to view in a child than a brazen disregard for the honor and authority of their parents. And far from being inappropriate for such a wicked list of sins, we might view this as one of the greatest evils in the entire chapter.

**Undiscerning *asynetous* Untrustworthy *asynthetous* Unloving *astorgous*
Unmerciful *aneleemonas***

We finish with four adjectives, each commencing with the prefix 'a' corresponding in English to 'un' ("unforgiving" omitted in most manuscripts). The English Standard Version translates it thus: "**foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.**"

Undiscerning *asynetous* means lacking insight or understanding. This does mean that the natural man is stupid. It means that the man who has suppressed the truth of the knowledge of God can give no plausible explanation for the world he observes. He has rejected the source of ethics, therefore can give no substantial basis for what is right in a moral sense or why morality should be pursued at all.

And it is not merely morals but the natural man has jettisoned the source of logic, science, art, economics, sociology and every other discipline in the created order. And it goes deeper. It's been said:

Paul calls unredeemed man's heart *asúnetos*, because of its inability to conclude from the observable creation that there must be a Creator.²

There is a great deal of dialogue regarding the inferior ethics of the Christian faith because the ethics are motivated by fear of judgment rather than man's inherent desire to do that which is right. Not only is this a false caricature of the motives of Christianity, it fails to recognize that when men becoming undiscerning in their ethics and view of the world in general, they necessarily become "**untrustworthy**" *asynthetous*.

The word simply means that a person cannot be trusted to keep their word – the word is often related to covenant breaking. This may sound unduly harsh since we all know unbelievers who are perhaps more trustworthy than the person next to us in church. Yet one need merely look at the institution of marriage to find the epidemic faithlessness to vows manifested in the monumentally high divorce rate. Simply put, it is difficult enough to do what is right when we know exactly what it is. But

² Zodhiates, S. (2000). The complete word study dictionary: New Testament (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

when man cannot discern what is right, it is impossible to expect faithfulness.

Bottom-line, there is only one true Promise-Keeper who knew the truth impeccably and performed the truth flawlessly, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Paul's use of the word "**unloving**" *astorgous* carries with it a unique category of being unloving – as it relates primarily to love within a family. I won't say a great deal here but this: The way a person treats their siblings will, more than anything else, reveal the way they'll treat their spouse. It's relatively easy to be viewed as loving to people you seldom see; it's those who you are with on a regular basis that test the truth mettle of your love.

Paul concludes with an attribute that, according to Jesus, is simply a non-negotiable when it comes to the fruit of a redeemed heart – "**Unmerciful**" *aneleemonas*.

It is no easy parable that ends in the words of Christ:

And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' ³⁴ And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. ³⁵ So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart (Matthew 18:33-35).

The ESV translates this word *Ruthless*. If Christians are to understand one thing, it is that they operate in a field of mercy – giving and (at a much greater level) receiving it. There is no place for the ruthless man in the kingdom of God. One might argue that the entire list crescendos with this final, damnable attribute of a merciless heart. Woe to the man who finds himself in this condition. See in Proverbs the fantasy of mercy apart from the knowledge of God: "**the mercy of the wicked is cruel**" (Proverbs 12:10).

We have early addressed the astonishing verse 32. So I will say little of it other than to quote John Calvin's profound observation:

...that men left nothing undone for the purpose of giving unbridled liberty to their sinful propensities; for having taken away all distinction between good and evil, they approved in themselves and in others those things which

they knew displeased God, and would be condemned by his righteous judgment. For it is the summit of all evils, when the sinner is so void of shame, that he is pleased with his own vices, and will not bear them to be reprov'd, and also cherishes them in others by his consent and approbation. This desperate wickedness is thus described in Scripture: *"They boast when they do evil," (Proverbs 2:14.)*

Calvin will go on to explain that if there remains some shame in our own sin, our condition is "**healable.**" Of course the healing comes from the Master Physician whose blood was shed for the remission of sin. Let us faithfully focus our hearts in that direction as we come to the Lord's Table.

Questions for Study

1. What are some reason the Apostle Paul might write the list found in the end of chapter one (pages 2, 3)?
2. What are some attributes of “evil-mindedness” (page 3)?
3. What are some helpful rules that can help us govern our speech (page 4)?
4. Have you noticed a hatred for God in the world? What does it look like (pages 4, 5)?
5. Paul uses three words that concern themselves with pride. Define them and not the distinctions. How do we contend with these vices (pages 5-7)?
6. What are some ways you’ve seen people invent evil things (page 7)?
7. Do you think “disobedient to parents” should be on this list? Explain why or why not (page 7).
8. Paul culminates his list with four power adjectives – how does undiscerning relate to untrustworthy (pages 8, 9)?
9. Discuss Paul’s unique use of the word “unloving”. What can we learn about someone by observing their relationship with their family (page 9)?
10. “Unmerciful” was said to be a non-negotiable for a Christian. Why do you suppose Jesus placed such a high priority on mercy (page 9)?
11. Calvin said that if shame of sin remains, sinful man is still “healable”. From what does man need healing and how does that healing come? Has it come to you (pages 9, 10)?

