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GOING DOWN, DOWN, DOWN (Part 1)

Romans 1:24-27

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Romans, Lesson 7

Going Down, Down, Down (Part 1) Romans 1:24-27

If you were born after 1970, you may not realize how drastically America and the West changed during the 1960's. I grew up in the 1950's watching TV shows like "Ozzie and Harriet," "Leave it to Beaver," and "Father Knows Best," all of which depicted the typical American family. The father wore a suit, supported the family, and was looked to as the head of the home. The mother wore a dress, prepared the meals, and dispensed wisdom to the kids to help them navigate life's normal struggles. There was not a hint of sexual immorality, whether with the parents or kids. A kiss between a teen boy and girl was about as far as things went for the kids. There were no references to drugs. It was pretty radical when Ricky Nelson formed a rock band, even though their music was pretty tame compared to today's standards.

When I was in high school, the word "gay" meant, "happy." I did not know what homosexuality is until somewhere around ninth grade. Back then, it was a gross put-down to say that a guy "sucked" (that is the origin of that term; I wince when I hear Christians use it). I didn't know what a condom was until I was in junior high. In my high school, a few of the kids smoked marijuana, but they were not in the "in" crowd. Using more potent drugs was pretty much unheard of.

I do not watch any of the current TV sitcoms. I'm probably a rare American, in that I've never watched an episode of "Cheers" or "Seinfeld" or other shows of that genre. But from reading reviews I know that on such shows, sex between unmarried partners is openly accepted, graphically talked about, and sometimes portrayed. Homosexuality is now accepted as normal. A popular show features housewives who are desperately looking for happiness by being unfaithful to their marriage vows. A current movie preaches that children raised by homosexual couples are just as emotionally healthy and normal as other children are.

We've gone down a long ways from the 1950's! Some would say that because of these flagrant sins, America is on the brink of

God's judgment. But Paul would say, "No, America is *already* under God's judgment." When a society flaunts and gives hearty approval to such sins, even applauding them as right, it shows that God has already given that society over to impurity, to degrading passions, and to a depraved mind.

Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 87) explains Paul's purpose in our text:

It is sometimes objected that this is not a balanced picture; the pagan world could do better than this. Of course it could, and Paul shows us something of this in the next chapter. But here he is not trying to picture the total scene. He is pursuing his theological purpose of showing that all people are sinners. In pursuit of this aim, he concentrates on that part of the picture which is relevant.... It is Paul's purpose to show that [sin] exists, and that it exists universally. Wherever pagans are to be found, the kinds of sin of which he speaks will be found also.

Paul's point in Romans 1:24-32 (we will only go through v. 27 this week) is:

When people reject God and exchange His glory for the worship of the creature, He gives them over to their sins and the horrible consequences.

As we saw last week, Paul is showing how the wrath of God is being "revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness" (1:18). One aspect of God's wrath is to give sinners over to their lusts, so that they experience the inevitable, horrible consequences of sin. That is to say, sin itself is its own punishment! People think that sin will bring them fulfillment and happiness. It may feel good in the short run. But God has designed His moral laws so that if you break them individually or if a society casts them off collectively, those laws turn around and break you! It's like the law of gravity: you can break it, but then it breaks you.

We might wonder when this divine judgment of giving people over to their sin took place. Is Paul describing the fall? Or does he have in mind the demise of certain cultures, such as Sodom and Gomorrah? Or is he talking about individuals who go so far in sin

that God gives them over to their sins? Probably he is referring to all of the above.

At the fall, the human race was cut off from fellowship with the holy God and plunged into sin. We all are born in sin, alienated from God. We are by nature spiritually blind, children of wrath, and under God's just condemnation. We are not sinners because we sin; rather, we sin because by nature we are sinners. Unless we are born spiritually by the power of the Holy Spirit, we will pursue a course of sin. Some are restrained from sinning more than others. But all people apart from God's grace in Christ, have cast off the living and true God and have embraced whatever false gods they think will bring them happiness. So in one sense, this applies to the entire human race, born in sin.

But on another level, it applies to particular cultures down through history. At the Tower of Babel, proud sinners defied God, bringing down His judgment by confusing their languages. Sodom and Gomorrah were so corrupt that God rained fire and brimstone on them as an example to others of His wrath against sin. When God told Moses and Joshua to destroy the Canaanites, it was because over four centuries, they had filled up the measure of their sin (Gen. 15:16). Ancient Greece and Rome had their times of glory, but idolatry and immorality brought them down. And so it has been down through history. When a people abandons God, at some point God abandons that people.

This is also true on the individual level. All people without Christ are in sin, but when an individual brazenly turns his back on the light that God has given him and goes full bore into a decadent lifestyle, it shows that God has given him over to his lusts. If he keeps going in that direction, he may eventually cross the point of no return, where he is so hardened in sin that he is beyond the hope of salvation!

Paul here makes two main points: (1) The root sin is to reject the truth of God and to worship the creature rather than the Creator (1:25). (2) When people reject God, He gives them over to their sins and the horrible consequences (1:24, 26-32). He shows this judgment three times by stating, "God gave them over" (1:24, 26, 28). First, God gave them over to impurity; second, He gave them over to the degrading passions of homosexuality; third He gave

them over to a depraved mind, expressed in all sorts of socially destructive sins.

1. The root sin is to reject the truth of God and to worship the creature rather than the Creator (1:25).

“For they exchanged the truth of God for the [lit.] lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.” Verse 25 explains the reason that God gave people over in their lusts to impurity (1:24), to degrading passions (1:26), and to a depraved mind (1:28) by basically repeating the truth of 1:21-23. Because people did not honor God or give Him thanks, their foolish hearts were darkened. Their foolishness led them to exchange the glory of the incorruptible God for idols.

“The truth of God” refers to the truth that He has revealed about Himself and about all things. God is not a projection of our ideas or a figment of human imagination. God *is*. He exists in and of Himself and He has always existed outside of time before He spoke the universe into existence. Our knowledge of Him can only come through His revelation of Himself, which is centered in Jesus Christ His Son and contained in the Bible. As we saw in 1:18 and 20, God reveals Himself generally through His wrath against sin and through His creation. But to know specifically who God is and how to be saved, we must have His Word. Contrary to the postulates of postmodernism, this truth about God revealed in the Bible is knowable and absolute.

But sinful men exchanged this truth of God for [lit.] “the lie,” which refers to the lie of idolatry. In 1:23, sinners exchanged the glory of God for idols. Here, they exchange the truth of God for the lie, that we can worship things other than God, all of which are mere creatures, not the Creator. It is the lie that any creature can live independently of God as “self-sufficient, self-directing, and self-fulfilling” (John Witmer, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy Zuck [Victor Books], 2:443). As a result of exchanging the glory of God for idols and exchanging the truth of God for the lie, God gave these sinners over to degrading passions, so that they exchanged their natural sexual orientation for that which is unnatural (1:26). The word “exchange” implies that if you cast off God, you will serve idols.

The important thing to see is that there is this cause and effect relationship. The root cause is the sin of rejecting the truth of God, resulting in worshiping the creature rather than the Creator. By referring to God as the Creator, Paul takes us back to the opening statement of the Bible (Gen. 1:1), "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The Bible does not debate the point or open it up for discussion. Rather, the Bible asserts that God created everything and that He did it by speaking it into existence ("God said," Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26; Ps. 33:6, 9). This asserts His sovereignty over everything. It means that as creatures, we depend totally on God and must be subject to Him. He is the only true God and He made all things for His glory.

Thus when Paul mentions God as the Creator, he almost uncontrollably adds, "who is blessed forever. Amen." It's as if he wants to clear the foul air after referring to men worshiping and serving the creature (H. C. G. Moule, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 50). Blessing, extolling, or glorifying God forever and ever is the reason that He created us. "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever" (Westminster Shorter Catechism). He is in fact blessed forever, whether we acknowledge Him or not (Rom. 9:5). Thus the root sin is when we turn from God and replace Him with the creature. Idolatry is the sin of worshiping anything in place of the true God.

In America, we do not see blatant idolatry as frequently as you see it in Asia or Africa. Most Americans do not set up statues and pray to them or offer incense or gifts before them. But there are many other forms of idolatry in America. If you "use" God for what He can give you and then "set Him back on the shelf" until the next time you need Him, you're doing the same thing that idolaters do with their idols. They use the idols when they need them to achieve their own purposes. They are not usually subject to the idols to follow their commands. Self is really the root idol. Self uses the idol to get what self wants.

We can fall into idolatry of things that otherwise are good. Some people in effect worship the family. God gives us our families and they are good in their proper perspective. But if we rely on the family in place of God, so that we can only find fulfillment and happiness in our families, we have fallen into idolatry and are not

following Jesus as Lord (Luke 14:26). Material possessions are a good gift from God and it's not wrong to enjoy such things (1 Tim. 6:17). But if we put our hope in things or in our investments and not in God, we have fallen into idolatry (Luke 12:16-21; 14:33). Vocations, entertainment, sports, computers, TV, and many other things can dominate our lives and become idols, taking the place that God alone deserves. This is the root sin: rejecting the truth of God and worshiping the creature instead of the eternally blessed Creator. "Amen" means, "So be it!"

2. When people reject God, He gives them over to their sins and the horrible consequences (1:24, 26-32).

Three times Paul says, "God gave them over": First (1:24), to impurity; second (1:26), to degrading passions (homosexuality); third, to a depraved mind (1:28). We find a similar expression in Psalm 81:12, where God responds to Israel's disobedience by saying, "So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart, to walk in their own devices." (See, also, Acts 7:42.) They abandoned God; God abandoned them. The phrase means that God took His hands off their lives and delivered them over to their sentence, where sin takes its own ugly course.

It does not in any way imply that God causes people to sin. But neither is God merely passive. Rather, as Frederic Godet (*Commentary on Romans* [Kregel], p. 107) says, "He positively withdrew His hand; He ceased to hold the boat as it was dragged by the current of the river." Douglas Moo (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 111) goes a bit farther: "God does not simply let the boat go—he gives it a push downstream."

Parents sometimes get to this point with a rebellious child. You say, "Do what you want and you will pay the consequences of your actions." Maybe you help him carry his duffel bag out the door. The father of the prodigal son did this with the boy's outrageous request to get his share of the inheritance before the father's death. He gave him what he wanted, and let him squander it all and end up in the pigsty. It reminds me of Psalm 106:15, where in response to Israel's demand for meat in the wilderness, it says, "So He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul" (NASB, margin). Sin is its own punishment!

Today we can only look briefly at the first two sections.

A. God gives sinners over to sexual impurity, resulting in the dishonoring of their bodies (1:24).

“Therefore, God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.” Paul is referring to sexual lusts. God designed sex as a good gift, but He clearly commands that it be restricted to monogamous, heterosexual marriages. In that context, the sexual union glorifies God as it expresses exclusive love between a man and a woman and is an earthly picture of the relationship between Christ and His church (Eph. 5:31-32).

Outside of that context, if we engage in sexual behavior, we dishonor our bodies and defile ourselves with impurity, a word used of decaying matter, like the contents of a grave (John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, NASB [Nelson Bibles], p. 1661). Paul says that if a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one flesh with her, but in so doing, he defiles the temple of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in believers (1 Cor. 6:16-19). He gives us a godly perspective of how to use our bodies when he concludes (1 Cor. 6:19b-20), “You are not your own. For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.”

Sexual lusts begin in the heart (Mark 7:21-23). If we do not judge lustful thoughts on the heart level, sooner or later we will face the temptation to involve our bodies. Does it feel good at the moment? Yes, of course, otherwise we wouldn't do it. But it leads to your being enslaved by sin. Since sex outside of marriage is outside of the context for which God designed it, it never completely satisfies. It leaves you empty and broken.

Before I leave this point, let me say to the men, especially: If you are enslaved to pornography, you have exchanged the truth of God for a lie. You are worshiping the creature, not the Creator. Viewing pornography weakens your resistance to an actual sexual encounter, which Satan will bring your way. If you yield to that, you dishonor your body, defile yourself, and start on this downward cycle. If you are married, viewing pornography sabotages your marriage. Jesus warned that if you do not take radical action (pluck out your eye, cut off your hand) to rid yourself of the sin of mental

lust, you are on your way to hell (Matt. 5:27-30)! I would not have said it so harshly, but Jesus did and He is Lord. So you don't want God to give you over to that sin! Get help if you need it, but judge lust before it judges you!

B. God gives sinners over to homosexuality, resulting in them receiving the due penalty of their sin (1:26-27).

We live in a time when the homosexual community has so strongly influenced our godless culture that if you stand against it and say that it is sin, you are labeled as an intolerant bigot. They have skillfully portrayed it as a "human rights" issue, so that those who oppose it seem anti-American. But God's Word is not tolerant of homosexuality or ambiguous about it: it is clearly sin (Gen. 19:4-5; Lev. 18:22; 20:13; Judges 19:22-23). Paul elsewhere includes it in lists of sins (1 Cor. 6:9; 1 Tim. 1:10).

But why does Paul focus on homosexual relations here? Thomas Schreiner (*Romans* [Baker], p. 94) explains,

Probably because it functions as the best illustration of that which is unnatural in the sexual sphere. Idolatry is "unnatural" in the sense that it is contrary to God's intention for human beings. To worship corruptible animals and human beings instead of the incorruptible God is to turn the created order upside down. In the sexual sphere the mirror image of this "unnatural" choice of idolatry is homosexuality.

Paul uses unusual Greek words for "male" and "female" here, which are elsewhere used in the creation account. His point is that homosexuality for either sex goes against God's intention in creation (Schreiner, p. 95). Just looking at how men's and women's bodies are designed should prove that point!

Paul says (1:27) that homosexuals receive "in their own persons the due penalty of their error." The error is not an inadvertent mistake, but rather the rejection of the true God for idols (Schreiner, p. 97). Paul may mean that being delivered over to homosexuality itself is the penalty. Contrary to the word "gay," homosexuals are disproportionately unhappy people. Those who attempt to live in committed homosexual relationships have a three to four times greater dissolution than that of heterosexual married couples. They experience much higher rates of domestic violence

than opposite sex couples do (these statements documented in an email from the Family Research Council, Aug. 10, 2010). *The Journal of Human Sexuality* (Vol. 1, p. 93, National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality, 2009) concludes with regard to homosexuals, "No other group of comparable size in society experiences such intense and widespread pathology."

Is AIDS God's judgment on homosexuals? If you mean that each person who has AIDS got it from sexual sin, the answer is no. Babies get it from their mothers and patients get it from tainted blood transfusions. But when God sends a temporal judgment due to a nation's sin, such as war, famine, natural disaster or disease, the so-called "innocent" suffer along with the directly guilty. The fact is, if there were no sexual promiscuity, especially homosexuality, there would be virtually no AIDS. There is an obvious, direct correspondence between practicing homosexuality and AIDS. So in that sense, it is God's judgment against that sin.

Are homosexuals born that way? There is no scientific evidence to date to support that claim, although researchers have desperately been looking for it. But even if the inclination is genetic, it still is sin to practice it. Some may be genetically prone to heterosexual lust or to anger or alcohol addiction, but these are still sins. Even if we are genetically predisposed to a sin, we are responsible before God if we yield to that sin.

Conclusion

The good news is, Jesus came to deliver us from our sins. Paul includes former homosexuals in Corinth when he wrote (1 Cor. 6:11), "Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God." That can be your testimony, too, if you will trust in Christ.

Application Questions

1. What are some forms of American idolatry? How can we guard ourselves from idols (1 John 5:21)?
2. Some organizations are committed to recovering the values of our Christian heritage in America through legislation. Is this the right approach? Will it help? What else is needed?
3. Can a person whom God has given over to his sins be saved? When has he crossed the line of no return?
4. Can a truly saved man be “addicted” to pornography? Consider Matthew 5:27-30 in your answer.

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