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## GOING DOWN, DOWN, DOWN (Part 2)

Romans 1:28-32

By

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Romans, Lesson 8

Going Down, Down, Down  
(Part 2) Romans 1:28-32

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote (*Life Together* [Harper & Row], pp. 118-119), "The most experienced psychologist or observer of human nature knows infinitely less of the human heart than the simplest Christian who lives beneath the Cross of Jesus. The greatest psychological insight, ability, and experience cannot grasp this one thing: what sin is."

We are studying the apostle Paul's penetrating analysis of sin that runs from Romans 1:18 through 3:20. He is showing why all people, no matter how good they may seem outwardly, need the gospel (1:16-17), namely, because all have sinned. Thankfully, the gospel is the power of God for salvation to *everyone* who believes. So God's only solution for the devastating effects of sin on the human race is the gospel, that Christ died for our sins and that He gives His righteousness to all who believe in Him.

Last time, we saw that the main theme of verses 24-32 is:

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

In these verses, Paul develops two main ideas:

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).

Three times Paul repeats the frightening phrase, "God gave them over":

- A. God gives sinners over to sexual impurity, resulting in the dishonoring of their bodies (1:24).
- B. God gives sinners over to homosexuality, resulting in them receiving the due penalty of their sin (1:26-27).

Both of these judgments deal with sexual sins. We saw that sin is its own punishment. It promises freedom, but it enslaves. It entices us by making us think that it will bring happiness and fulfillment, and for a short time, it is pleasurable (Heb. 11:25). But the long-term effects of sin are devastating. It dishonors our bodies, defiles our conscience, destroys loving relationships, tears apart families, eats away at the foundation of society, and results in God's temporal and ultimately eternal judgment.

John MacArthur ([gty.org/Resources/Sermons/45-15\\_Abandoned-by-God-Part-2](http://gty.org/Resources/Sermons/45-15_Abandoned-by-God-Part-2)) cites Thomas Watson, who said, "Sin puts gravel in our bread and wormwood in our cup." Commenting on the phrase, "God gave them over," MacArthur continues (*ibid.*),

And so man is turned over to the law of his own sinfulness and its compounded consequences.

And people really don't like it. They run off to the psychiatrist, the psychologist, the analyst. They run off to take a vacation to try to forget. They travel. They entertain themselves. They drink. They take drugs. They seek alleviation of the consequences of sin every way possible. But have you noticed how utterly impossible it is? In fact, the highest suicide rate in America among any profession is that of psychiatrists who not only can't help people but can't help themselves. And this is the judgment of God upon them, that there is no way out of the inevitable consequence of their sinfulness. There's no alleviation. There's no freedom from the bondage. There's no limiting of the pain. There's no easing of the guilt because they're turned over to wrath. And so it is the divine act of judgment on them that they are doomed to compound their sinfulness and have to endure all of its consequences.

With that as a review and introduction, we continue our study by looking at Paul's third example of God giving sinners over:

C. God gives sinners over to a depraved mind, resulting in lives full of evil and its consequences (1:28-32).

If Paul had stopped after verses 24-25, many of us could think, "Preach it, brother! Hit all those sexually immoral people! I'm glad that I've never fallen into adultery or gross sexual sin!" And, if he had stopped after verses 26-27, many more could say,

“Yes, Paul—give it to those homosexuals! They need to hear about God’s judgment on their sin.” We smugly would be thinking, “I’m glad that I’ve never desired to practice that sin!”

But Paul doesn’t stop there! He keeps going by moving from the area of sexual sins to that of relational sins. While some of them, like murder or being a hater of God, sound extreme, before we congratulate ourselves on never doing these sins, we need to remember Jesus’ teaching, that if we’ve ever been angry with our brother, we have committed murder in God’s sight (Matt. 5:21-22). If we do not put God in first place in every area of our lives, and honor and obey Him as He deserves, we really hate Him (Rom. 8:7; John 14:15). So as we work through Paul’s long list of sins that mark those whom God has given over to a depraved mind, if we’re honest we will recognize that he is describing *our* sins. Thus we need daily to apply the gospel to our hearts.

Paul traces four steps in the downward spiral:

- (1) Sin begins when we deliberately shut God out of our lives (1:28a).

“They did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer....” As we saw last time, “they” can refer to the entire human race after the fall. On another level, it refers to certain civilizations that have turned their backs on God. Or on an individual level, it applies to those who go headlong into sin. “God” is in the emphatic position in the sentence, indicating that it was no less than God, the Creator (1:25), whom they no longer saw fit to acknowledge (Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Apollos/Eerdmans], p. 93).

The Greek word translated “see fit” means to approve by testing. It was used of testing metals like gold to see if they were genuine. So Paul means that these sinners tested God and concluded, “He’s not real.” And so they rejected Him. Maybe they prayed and asked God to spare the life of a little child or a loved one, but that person died. Maybe they asked Him to deliver them from some problem, but things only got worse. So they concluded that God must not be genuine. They shut Him out of their lives.

At the root of this is that they were sitting in judgment on God. He was on trial and they determined that He is a phony. So rather than seeking to know God and submit to His ways, as re-

vealed in His Word, they did not see fit to hold Him in their knowledge. They thought, "If God is like that, if He doesn't relieve my suffering, then I don't want to know Him." So they cast Him aside like fool's gold. They shut Him out of their lives.

That is always the first step in sin: Rather than submit to God by obedience to His Word and by persevering through trials, we turn our backs on Him. We decide that we know better than He does about how to be happy. So we move ahead without God.

(2) Sin becomes entrenched when God gives us over to depraved minds (1:28b).

"God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper." As we saw last time, God's giving sinners over to the consequences of their sin does not imply that He is in any way responsible for their sin. Rather, He lifts His restraining hand and perhaps gives them a gentle push out the door, saying, "If you want to sin, go for it!" He consigns them to their self-willed rebellion, with all of the horrible consequences. Sin is its own punishment, as we will see again in verses 29-31.

There is a play on words in the Greek text here. Just as sinners tested God and rejected Him, so God gave them over to minds that were tested and found false. They did not see fit to acknowledge God, so God gave them over to unfit minds. William Newell (*Romans Verse by Verse* [Moody Press], p. 34) renders it, "And just as they did not approve to have God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a mind disapproved of Him." It means that "their minds became quite unable to make trustworthy moral judgments" (Morris, p. 94). "Those things which are not proper" refers to "that which is offensive to man even according to the popular moral sense of the Gentiles, i.e., what even natural human judgment regards as vicious and wrong" (H. Schlier, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. by Gerhard Kittel [Eerdmans], 3:440).

All sin begins in the mind or heart. Jesus said (Mark 7:21-23), "For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man." Many of these sins that Jesus lists overlap with

Paul's list here. But the point is, sin warps our thinking so that we do not see it from God's perspective. We begin to think that sin is not so bad, because it will get us what we really want in life. So we justify ourselves and blame others.

For example, maybe you start thinking, "I deserve a better wife than this nagging, complaining woman that I live with. I'm a good man. I've treated her right, but all I get is griping." At this point, in your mind you are not acknowledging God and His Word, which tells you to love your wife sacrificially and help her become holy. When you do that, you're a sitting duck for Satan to bring along a kind, understanding woman at work, who is divorced from her abusive husband. She's looking for a good man just like you! So you fall into adultery and divorce. It all started in your mind.

So sin begins when we deliberately shut God out of our lives. It becomes entrenched when God gives us over to depraved, spiritually unfit minds.

- (3) Sin expresses itself in all sorts of ways that damage interpersonal relationships (1:29-31).

The manuscripts behind the King James translation add the word "immorality" after "unrighteousness," but it is probably not in the original text. Paul has just dealt with immorality in 1:24-27. So the list contains 21 different sins. Paul has many other such lists (Rom. 13:13; 1 Cor. 5:10-11; 6:9-10; 2 Cor. 12:20; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 4:19, 31; 5:3-5; Col. 3:5, 8; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; 6:4-5; 2 Tim. 3:2-5; Titus 3:3). He isn't saying that every sinner is guilty of every one of these sins, but rather that the human race is guilty of sin in thought, word and deed. The list contains representative examples. All of the sins except for "haters of God" are relationally destructive sins. When we practice them, our families and our entire society suffer.

A cursory reading of terms like "envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossips, and slanderers" reminds us "that evildoers are not just one happy band of brothers" (Morris, p. 96). Sinners are out to get their way, even if it means destroying the reputation or even the lives of rivals who get in the way.

The first four terms come under the description, "being filled with," and are general words for sin: "unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, and evil." Then Paul says, "full of," followed by five terms

(in the genitive), “envy, murder, strife, deceit, and malice.” Those terms, “filled with” and “full of,” indicate that these sinners did not just have a slight tendency or inclination towards these sins. Then there are 12 words (in the accusative, in apposition to “they”). The last four words in this group (1:31) all begin with the Greek alpha-privative, which negates the word it is added to. The NIV tries to capture this in English with, “senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” Let’s look briefly at each term (following the NASB):

\*“Unrighteousness”—is a general term for sin. William Barclay (*The Letter to the Romans* [Westminster, revised], p. 34) says that this word refers to “the man who robs both man and God of their rights. He has so erected an altar to himself in the center of things that he worships himself to the exclusion of God and man.”

\*“Wickedness”—This word often is used to describe Satan, the evil one, “who deliberately attacks and aims to destroy the goodness of men.” It refers to “the active, deliberate will to corrupt and to inflict injury” (Barclay, *ibid.*).

\*“Greed”—“means the inordinate desire to have more. It is selfishness unlimited.... This covetous person pursues his own desires with a complete disregard of the effect on other people. He does not care about others but is a complete egotist” (Morris, p. 96).

\*“Evil”—“is the most general Greek word for badness. It describes the case of a man who is destitute of every quality which would make him good” (Barclay, p. 35). The scale of his life has tipped toward the worse.

\*“Envy”—Aristotle distinguishes “envy” from “jealousy.” He says that jealousy is the desire to have what another man possesses, without necessarily bearing a grudge against him for having it. But envy wants to deprive the other man of the desired thing more than to gain it for oneself. Xenophon said, “The envious are those who are annoyed only at their friends’ successes” (D. H. Field, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. by Colin Brown [Zondervan], 1:557).

\*“Murder”—Envy often results in murder (Mark 15:10). As we’ve seen, Jesus extended this sin to being angry with someone else (Matt. 5:21-22). So the seeds of murder lie in all of our hearts.

\*"Strife"—is "the *contention* which is born of envy, ambition, the desire for prestige, and place and prominence" (Barclay, p. 35). All of these sins stem from selfishness.

\*"Deceit"—is the word used for bait for fishing. It refers to any deliberate attempt to mislead someone for your own advantage. Morris observes (p. 96), "There is nothing straightforward about sin, and sinners do not hesitate to deceive one another if their purposes can be advanced."

\*"Malice"—is "conscious and intentional wickedness" (Morris, p. 97, citing TDNT, 3:485). Aristotle defined it as "the spirit which always supposes the worst about other people" (Barclay, p. 36). It is the opposite of biblical love, which thinks the best about others unless there is solid evidence to the contrary (1 Cor. 13:7).

\*"Gossips"—is literally, "whisperers." It refers to the one who likes secretly to spread malicious stories about others. Since he speaks in secret, the one whom he speaks against cannot defend himself, since he doesn't know about the falsehood being spread.

\*"Slanderers"—refers to someone who openly speaks evil against someone, intending to hurt his reputation.

\*"Haters of God"—This is the one term directly aimed at God, not at others. He sees God as "the barrier between him and his pleasures" (Barclay, p 37). God is out to spoil his fun.

\*"Insolent"—"refers to a lofty sense of superiority out of which the insolent person treats all others as beneath him" (Morris, pp. 97-98). This person is "so proud that he defies God." He is cruel and insulting (Barclay, p. 37).

\*"Arrogant"—is the word used three times in Scripture when it says that "God opposes the proud" (Prov. 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). It refers to a man who has "a certain contempt for everyone" except himself (Barclay, p. 37).

\*"Boastful"—came from a word meaning "wandering." It referred to wandering merchants who would make extravagant claims for their products that could not be substantiated (Morris, p. 98).

\*"Inventors of evil"—are not content with usual ways of sinning, so they invent new, outrageous sins that push the limit.

\*“Disobedient to parents”—This sin strikes at the heart of family solidarity. “It implies a lack of gratitude and a contempt for family authority” (Morris, p. 98).

\*“Without understanding”—refers to those who act stupidly, especially in the moral realm. They do not fear God, which is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10).

\*“Untrustworthy”—refers to those who break covenants. They don’t keep their word. They don’t do what they promise and then they make up excuses for why they didn’t do it.

\*“Unloving”—means “without natural affection.” It refers to parents who do not love their children or to children who hate their parents or to brothers and sisters who fight with each other.

\*“Unmerciful”—refers to someone lacking compassion and kindness for others. Morris says (p. 99), “It is significant that, in an epistle that will stress God’s mercy throughout, the list of vices should be rounded off with ‘merciless.’ This is the very depth of evil. The person who shows no mercy can scarcely go lower.”

Paul isn’t saying that every society is marked by being full of all of these sins. So what’s his point? John Piper answers ([desiring-god.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/BySeries/2/1056\\_The\\_Perils\\_of\\_Disapproving\\_God/](http://desiring-god.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/BySeries/2/1056_The_Perils_of_Disapproving_God/)), “The point, I think, is to give us enough examples to show that virtually every form of evil has to do with God and comes from failing to know him and approve him and love him above all things. In other words, he gives us a sweeping array of evils to waken us to the fact that the ruin of any area of life is owing to the abandonment of God.”

But we haven’t hit bottom yet! Paul adds one more point:

- (4) Sin reaches its depths when sinners not only practice sin, but also heartily approve of others who practice sin (1:32).

“And although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.” What a description of our society! People know God’s moral standards through conscience or a general sense of right and wrong. Maybe they know about the Ten Commandments. But even

though God's Word threatens eternal death for those who break these commandments, these sinners cast off all restraint. They thumb their noses at God as they revel in their sin. And they're happy to see others sinning. It helps ease their guilt.

The whole "gay pride" movement is a flagrant example of those who not only engage in sin privately, but openly boast of it and encourage others to do it. I recently heard of another example on NPR. It told of a computer dating web site that is devoted to helping married people who want to commit adultery link up with others who want to do the same! The owner of the site defended it as providing a service for those who were unhappy!

### Conclusion

The danger of these lists of sin is that we read them and think, "I've got my faults, but thank God I'm not *that* bad!" But these verses should cause us all to examine our hearts and to fear sinning. W. H. Griffith Thomas wisely wrote, (*St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 75), "The possibilities of evil in the human heart apart from divine grace are as real as they ever were, and no one who knows the plague of his own heart will ever dare to say that even these depths of evil are impossible, apart from the restraining influence of the grace of God." These verses should cause us to examine whether we are truly living for God's glory or whether we may be substituting something from the creation (ourselves, our possessions, some other person, etc.) in the place that only belongs to the Creator.

If all we had were these verses, it would be a hopeless and depressing picture. We can try to pass legislation to promote morality, but such legislation is of limited value. The sins in these verses go down to the heart level; so we need a heart solution. The only solution is the gospel that changes our hearts (1:16-17). God's wrath is against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (1:18), but, thank God, Christ came to die for the ungodly and unrighteous (Rom. 4:5; 5:6-8)! Romans 1:18-32 shows that God's wrath against our sin is justified. We all deserve His judgment. But they also lead to the good news, that God has provided the righteousness we need in Jesus Christ (1:17; 3:21-26). And, this gift of righteousness is not given to those who try really hard, but rather to those who trust in Christ.

And so I conclude by asking, "Have you trusted in Jesus Christ to save you from God's wrath?" And, "Are you applying the gospel to your daily life so that you overcome these sins that characterize the world without God?"

### Application Questions

1. Can genuine believers be given over to a depraved mind or does this only refer to unbelievers? See 1 Cor. 2:16.
2. Why is it crucial to understand that sin begins in the mind (or heart)? How does this relate to building a strategy for overcoming sin?
3. Go over the list of sins and ask, "Which ones am I most prone to commit?" How can you plan not to do it?
4. Discuss: Are Christians giving hearty approval to sin (v. 32) when they enjoy watching sexual or violent scenes in movies?

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