

## “THE NEXT TO LAST WORD”

Studies in Romans – 2

Romans 1:18-32 (p. 1090)

The preacher was in rare form. He was expanding on his favorite topic – **sin**. First he railed against the sins of the flesh, talking about shameful lusts and indecent acts. “*Preach the Word,*” crooned Sister Agatha. Then he began carrying on about greed and depravity. “*Amen, Brother. Amen!*” chimed in Sister Agatha. Before long he got going on envy and murder and strife and deceit and malice. “*Now I call that preachin’,*” said Sister Agatha. She was having the time of her life, nodding and beaming her approval. Then the preacher began to talk about the sin of gossip and a loose tongue. Whereupon Sister Agatha stood up, turned, and stormed out of the church, muttering to herself as she left, “*That ain’t preachin’ – that’s meddlin’!*”

Today we’re going to look at St. Paul’s anthropology (his doctrine of man), and in particular, his doctrine of sin. Without any warning, right on the heels of his great Credo in Romans 1:16-17, Paul abruptly begins the “bad news” section of his letter; and it’s obvious that he isn’t going to waste any time getting to the point. The topic is sin and his message is aimed any anyone within range (including Sister Agatha). Paul is intent on making sure that his readers realize, first, the immensity of the human dilemma; and second, understand that they are in the middle of it – in fact, they’re part of the problem. He wants to make it clear that the human predicament is a compounding crisis; that is, sin builds on itself – it’s a growing pile of broken relationships.

Notice the progression in verses 18-32. It begins with a broken relationship with **God**, then it moves to a broken relationship with the **self**, and then eventually to a broken relationship with **others and the whole created order**. That’s the way sin works. Now I want us to follow Paul’s reasoning through this crisis.

**I.** The problem of sin, Paul says, ***begins with a broken relationship with God.*** In verse 18, Paul writes, “*the wrath of God is being revealed against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth... since what may be known about God is plain to them.*” From Paul’s perspective (and this is the overwhelming witness of Scripture) our relationship with God is primary. All of our relationships depend on that one. If our relationship with God is healthy, our other relationships will likely be healthy as well. But, if we suppress the truth about who God is – that is, if we deny his rightful claim on our lives – then we fracture that primary relationship.

In Paul's view, humans are naturally religious. There is, as Pascal once put it, a "God-shaped vacuum" inside each person. And when we suppress the truth about God, and thus break our relationship with him, we will invariably lay hold of something or someone to take his place. We're very uncomfortable with that emptiness inside, so we fill it. That is simply the way we're made. St. Paul put the matter this way in verse 23: "*(They) exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images...*"

The key word there is exchanged. It involves a choice, a decision; it's a free act. The deterioration of our relationship with God, and his being replaced in the relationship, isn't something that just happens. It is the result of our deliberate, free choice. Now, this is a theme we'll be coming back to again and again in this study. In his doctrine of man, his study of human nature, Paul never loses sight of our freedom. Nor will he ever let us forget that we are free – and therefore responsible. Paul recognizes that our freedom is the stuff of which human greatness is made. But he also knows that it's the source of great human tragedy and of all sorts of crises in our lives. And here, Paul says, the compounding crisis is rooted in our choosing to break our relationship with God.

Verse 23 says, "*(They) exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*" Notice the sequence there. It's a process of deterioration as we move from a worship of that which we admire to that which we fear. We'll always fill that void inside with something – even if it's patently false and evil, rather than leave it empty. And since no one is capable of filling the role of God, our religious nature continues its search from one inadequate substitute to another – from one religious fad to another; from man to bird to animal and finally to snake – to the worship of fear itself. In a kind of desperate but futile hope, we end up honoring that which we despise.

2. But the crisis doesn't end there. Regardless of what we worship in place of God, when the wrong thing becomes the central focus of our lives, the result is that we become inwardly confused; in effect *we suffer a broken relationship with ourselves*. We lose touch with who we are. In verses 24-27 Paul describes this spiritual disorientation in terms of human sexuality.

Interestingly, over a hundred years ago Sigmund Freud theorized that the most important clue to personal wholeness is the way in which one's sexuality is resolved, or not resolved, within the whole personality. But long before the advent of psychoanalysis, Paul wrote a little general essay on the confusion of men and women who have broken away from God, and he described it in terms of sexual behavior.

Now, I see no reason here to think that Paul is implying that sexual disorientation is any more serious than any of the other evidences of the human

crisis. Homosexual behavior is a relatively minor theme in Paul's view of human nature and sin. He mentions it twice – here and in 1 Corinthians 6:9. So a preoccupation with homosexuality may be more a reflection of our own theological view than that of the New Testament. Nevertheless, Paul mentions homosexual behavior because it graphically represents the kind of disorientation that marks the second stage of the growing crisis – a broken and confused relationship with the self.

The effect of losing touch with God and with yourself is loneliness, a sense of emptiness inside that will not be filled. Notice in verse 27 Paul says that these men and women have “received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.” It would be interesting, I suppose, to ask how many of you, in reading that verse, thought of STDs. I'll confess that the thought crossed my mind. I've actually heard otherwise thoughtful Christians claim that AIDS is God's punishment on homosexuals. To me that seems a perverse view of God's judgment.

But if Paul wasn't talking about sexually transmitted diseases here, then what is this “due penalty” to which he refers? Karl Barth, the great 20th century theologian, said that the “due penalty” of sin is its success. He wrote in his commentary on Romans: *“The enterprise of setting up the ‘no God’ is avenged by its success – our conduct becomes governed precisely by what we desire.”* In other words, whatever you lust after will eventually succeed in become the ruling force in your life, though it could never satisfy your heart.

In C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters* there is a memorable line in which Screwtape, the senior devil, instructs Wormwood, his protégé, on the results that they are after in his human subject. *“An ever-increasing desire for an ever-diminishing pleasure,”* he says. That's what we want! The “due penalty” of sin is that it works – but it never satisfies.

The disturbing thing is that God lets us get away with it. David the psalmist was right: we are “fearfully and wonderfully made!” Not only are we free to break away from God, and free to choose, against our own better judgment, to distort our relationship with ourselves. Apparently God isn't going to stop us. That is a fearful reality.

Note in verses 24, 26 and 28 the repeated use of the phrase: *“God gave them over...”* That kind of judgment language has a disturbing ring of finality about it. It's as though God were saying: *“I've had it with you. I give up. Go ahead; dig your own grave.”* The central theological question is: How final is God's word here? Is there a point where He gives up on sinners? We'll come back to that question in a few moments. But first, notice the third stage in this growing crisis.

**3.** Paul says that when my relationship with God is broken, it leads to a distortion of my own identity; and that, in turn, has profound ethical repercussions.

Idolatry, regardless of the form it takes, leads to inward confusion; and that, in turn, results in *broken and hurtful relationships with others and the whole created order*.

In verse 28 Paul writes, “*Since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done.*” In fact, when you read Paul’s litany of social sins, beginning at verse 29, you begin to realize just how complex and widespread the crisis of sin has become.

As I said early on, Paul’s intent in this “bad news” section of his letter is twofold. He wants to underscore the immensity of the human dilemma. But he also wants his readers to realize that they themselves are part of the problem. One of the major issues we face today, I fear, is that these ethical crises have become so commonplace that we’ve come to accept certain evils as normal behavior. We need to take to heart Paul’s incisive words in verse 32: “*Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.*”

But try as we might, we can never fully escape our own greatness; and that includes our freedom and therefore our responsibility for our sin. Whether we admit it or not, we live in a moral universe. And sooner or later every person and every society will have to answer for their behavior. That’s the kind of compelling argument that Paul makes in this “bad news” section of the letter.

But there’s one more thing that has to be said today. I mentioned a few moments ago that the judgment language in verses 24, 26 and 28 has a disturbing ring of finality about it. “*God gave them over...*” it says repeatedly. And I suggested that the central theological question that it raises is this: Just how final is God’s word here? Is there a point at which he gives up on sinners and says to us, in effect, “*I’ve had it with you?*”

One of the remarkable lessons Scripture teaches us is how, in both the Old and New Testaments, judgment language is used to intensify the crisis to the point that there is no possibility for it being resolved apart from God himself intervening. Consider the words of the prophet in Jeremiah 30:12. “*This is what the Lord says (to Israel): Your wound is incurable, your injury beyond healing. There is no...remedy for your sore, no healing for you... because your guilt is so great and your sins so many.*” That sounds terribly final, doesn’t it? And yet just five verses later (in chapter 30, verse 17) this is what the Lord says through Jeremiah: “*But I will restore you to health and heal your wounds,*” declares the Lord.

And even in the New Testament there is that same overwhelming judgment followed by unexpected hope. In Revelation 3:15 this is what the Lord God says: “*I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to*

*spit you out of my mouth.” You’re disgusting! And yet the Lord goes on to say in verse 19, “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock...”*

Paul is doing the same thing here in the opening lines of his “bad news.” The passage that we’ve been studying this morning, taken out of its larger context, appears grim and hopeless. But remember, Paul’s analysis of the human condition, as complex as it is, is just one part of a far greater reality. Paul has to make a case for the illness before he can prescribe the cure. You hear the case for the prosecution before the defense. So when Paul uses the phrase, “*God gave them over,*” he is using it in this same prophetic sense that there is more yet to be said.

I know of no one who has grasped this truth better than Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the twentieth century German evangelical martyr. In his “*Letters and Papers From Prison*” he talked about sin and judgment in this penultimate sense. And this is what he wrote: “*It is only when one submits to the law that one can speak of grace, and only when one sees the anger and wrath of God hanging like grim realities over the head of one’s enemies that one can know something of what it means to love them and forgive them. I don’t think it is Christian to want to get to the New Testament too soon and too directly. We have often talked about this before, and I am more than ever convinced that I am right. You cannot and must not speak the last word before you have spoken the next to last.*”

The Gospel of which Paul is not ashamed, and which he is so eager to share, is the unspeakable good news of God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. But before you can understand the depth of Christ’s love, you need to understand just how much his love had to endure. Paul has good news to share with anyone who will listen. But first you have to hear the bad news in order to understand just how good the good news is. And we will get there – to God’s “last word.” But before that we still have much to think about. So next week, as we get into chapter 2, we’ll take a closer look at how judgment works. Your assignment is Romans, chapter 2, verses 1-16.

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