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Romans #9
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Sermon Summary #9

This is What Happens when People Hate God Romans 1:28-32

In his acceptance speech for the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 1983, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn addressed the reason for the Russian Revolution that resulted in the slaughter of 60 million people. After spending fifty years studying this question, Solzhenitsyn summarized his conclusion with this statement: *“Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.”*

Solzhenitsyn is one of my heroes, but I must take issue with his conclusion. The reason for the Russian Revolution, indeed, the reason for the wickedness and corruption and widespread immorality in our world is not simply that people have forgotten God. They remember him well enough. The problem is that they hate him. Of course, I think Solzhenitsyn would agree with me.

It is fascinating to observe how our so-called experts account for why the world is what it is today. Some blame the lack of a good educational system. Others point to the adverse influence of technology. Some insist that the fault lies with a particular economic system, be it capitalism or socialism or communism. Many insist it is the extreme moral relativism so prevalent everywhere we look. Then there are those who actually think that the world is in pretty good shape after all.

But the assessment of the Apostle Paul about why any society at any time in history degenerates into moral debauchery and social unrest and unrestrained evil is rather unique. He clearly insists that it is because men and women hate God. They know he exists. They know what he’s like. They are keenly aware of their responsibility to thank him, honor him, and obey him. But they hate him. *And they hate him because they love themselves above all else, and God’s existence and commandments pose an ever-present threat to their determination to indulge their personal desires and satisfy their sinful lusts.*

One of the things that Paul will make clear in our passage today is that when people sink ever more deeply into idolatry and immorality, they lose their capacity even to see what is happening. Their minds are so depraved, darkened, and turned inwardly upon themselves that they lack the perspective to understand evil for what it is. They eventually end up calling evil good, and good evil.

The only way that anyone can know what is good and what is evil is by looking away from one’s own heart and mind and personal preferences and turning to the revelation that our Creator has made of his will and ways. Contrary to the way so many think today, the problem we face isn’t out there, and the solution is in here, in our hearts. No. The problem is in here, in our hearts, and the solution is out there, in the God who created us all.

“God gave them up”

Let’s back up a bit and make sure we know what is going on in Romans 1. Three times in this chapter we are told that when mankind exchanged the glory of God for idols and immersed themselves in immorality and all manner of sin that God “gave them up/over.”

Stage One: God has made himself known in creation, in nature. He has done so with such utter and undeniable

clarity that no one has an excuse for their unbelief and their refusal to honor God (v. 21). Paul says it with unqualified confidence: “although they knew God” (v. 21a), they refused to thank him, honor him, and obey him. Their willful disobedience cannot be blamed on ignorance or the lack of knowledge of God. No, they very clearly “knew” God but chose to turn their backs on him. They “became futile in their thinking . . . and exchanged the glory of the immortal God” for man-made images (vv. 22-23). Therefore, “God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity” (v. 24).

Stage Two: It gets worse. Because they “exchanged the truth about God for a lie” and chose to serve and worship the creature rather than the Creator (v. 25), God once again “gave them up” (v. 26). This time he gave them over to “dishonorable passions” as they rejected his design for male-female sexual relationships and embraced homosexuality. Homosexuality, therefore, is not a phenomenon that will bring God’s judgment. The spread of homosexuality and the way many now take “pride” in it is itself God’s judgment.

Stage Three brings us to our text for today. Since mankind “did not see fit to acknowledge God” (v. 28a), God once again, in judgment, “gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done” (v. 28b). In this case, the sin of mankind is not restricted to sexual immorality but extends to all manner of evil deeds and wickedness, about which we read in vv. 29-31.

This ever-accelerating downward spiral of human wickedness can be traced to one fundamental, underlying reality. ***People hate God.*** Sin is not the result of ignorance or any supposed lack of information about God’s existence and nature. All mankind know of God’s existence and character. The problem is that they don’t like him! They hate the idea that they are obligated to submit their lives to him. They feel oppressed when told that they must believe as true what he says is true and reject as false what he says is false. The consequence for this selfish rebellion is that eventually God gives them up to their chosen course in life.

When God removes his restraint on the sinful propensities of the human heart, sin not only intensifies and expands, it also accelerates. Again, let me emphasize that God is not causing people to sin. He gives them over “to” impurity and “to” dishonorable passions and “to” a debased mind. In other words, when God gives people over to their sin it presupposes the prior existence of those sins. God gives them over to what they have already chosen for themselves.

People often ask, “Is this decision by God to give people over to their sin permanent?” In other words, is there no hope left for those whom God has given over to their sin? That is something only God knows. Make no mistake: there is such a thing as ***a point of no return.*** It is possible to fall so far into sin that God utterly and forever abandons that person to the condemnation they themselves have chosen. Jesus mentions this in Matthew 12 when he discusses blasphemy of the Holy Spirit. This, he says, is a sin that is beyond forgiveness. It is beyond forgiveness only because their sin has so hardened their hearts that they are incapable of repentance.

But we can never know with certainty if or when that point is reached. We are never permitted in Scripture to say, “That person has gone too far; that person is beyond all hope of recovery; therefore, we must cease to pray for them, we must cease to share the gospel with them.” No, only God knows, and as far as I can tell from Scripture, he never chooses to reveal that to us.

Today we are looking at the third time that God is said to have given people up or over to a deeper cultivation of their chosen sinful lifestyle. In vv. 18-27 it was to “immorality,” primarily lust and sexual impurity. Here it is to a “debased mind,” a mind that is warped and perverted and justifies its own misguided thinking. Some think Paul was obsessed with sex, but here we see that he envisions a wide array of human misbehavior.

So, it is quite clear that Paul wants us to see ***the effects upon the human race of willful suppression of the truth of God.*** There is a sense in which all the evil of the world is like a fast-moving river of polluted water that flows from the initial spring of rejecting God. They know God exists. They are undeniably aware of their responsibility to thank him and honor him with their lives. But they hate God. They do all they can to push him out of their conscious

thought. They look at God's unmistakable glory and choose to set it aside and exchange it for the corrupt images and lifeless idols of their own making.

This is what provokes the wrath of God. Back in v. 18 we are told that God's wrath "is [being] revealed [continuously] from heaven" because the human race has concluded that God isn't worthy of their affection or adoration. In fact, as we see in v. 30, they hate God. They despise him. And the fruit of this antipathy is the vast array of every conceivable sin.

God's response to this isn't first to consign mankind to hell. His initial response is to withdraw his gracious restraints on the human heart such that people sink ever more deeply and with greater speed into the immoral swamp into which they have jumped.

America and all other societies and countries are mired in the mud of immorality and idolatry not so much because they have adopted secular theories of government or ethical relativism. They adopt these views and the corruption it breeds because "they did not see fit to acknowledge God" (v. 28). They didn't want God to have any place in their minds or any authority over how they live. People don't want God. They don't want his revealed moral will. They want unfettered self-determination and self-exaltation.

I think Paul's aim in listing all these many sins is to demonstrate that virtually every form of human wickedness and immorality and idolatry is the result of a rejection of God. It is the willful, inexcusable refusal to thank him and honor him and obey him that leads to this sweeping array of human transgressions. Anytime anyone asks, "Why is the world in such a mess?", the answer is that people have abandoned God. They "did not see fit to acknowledge God" (v. 28). So God gave them up to their evil desires.

Thus, Paul's aim is to help us see the connection between the rejection of God and every sin in every country in every age of the world. The sin of mankind is rooted in the rejection of God.

I read recently that the murder rate in Chicago has reached an all-time high. Why? Because people don't regard God as worthy of their devotion. Adultery is rampant. Why? Because people have exchanged the glory of God for self-indulgence. So many of our politicians are corrupt and self-serving. Why? Because they have suppressed the truth about God in their unrighteousness. Gossip and slander and sexual perversion and violence and arrogance and envy are everywhere because people hate God. If we are untrustworthy and consistently fail to keep our promises, it is because we have refused to honor God with our lives.

Paul's language suggests the idea of such people testing the possibility or appeal of acknowledging God and concluding that he is not qualified to receive their approval. He is unworthy of their devotion. He has no intrinsic value. There is nothing beautiful or compelling in his character. But the mind that draws this conclusion is itself unqualified for anything worthwhile and virtuous. God thus gives them over to the worthless mind that found God to be worthless (cf. v. 21).

But there is glorious, great news in the midst of this immoral and idolatrous mess. In sovereign mercy, in and through a grace that we do not deserve, God is working to call out from the mass of fallen humanity a people for himself. Through the gospel message of what he has done in and through Jesus Christ, God has provided us with salvation, deliverance from his wrath and eternal judgment. And he freely grants this to anyone who will believe.

The only thing that will bring the experience of salvation instead of the suffering of God's wrath is the very righteousness of God himself. But we don't have it. Yet God requires it. So how do we get saved? We are saved when God mercifully and lovingly and graciously gives us the righteousness that he requires. And he does this to any and all who will believe the good news of Jesus Christ (vv. 16-17).

The Proliferation and Spread of Sin (vv. 28-31)

There have been numerous attempts to classify or find some intentional structure in the list of sins that Paul mentions in vv. 29-31. The most that can be said is that the vice list has 21 elements. The first set, consisting of four sins, is general in nature and points to the breadth of human wickedness. The second set has five sins listed. They are "full" of such sins. The third set has twelve items and describes not so much the sins committed but the people who

practice them.

Not every sin is listed here. This is not an exhaustive list of human rebellion, but it does cover the bases pretty well. There is economic sin (“greed”), social disorder (murder, strife, deceit, malice), the breakdown of the family (they are “disobedient to parents,” v. 30), relational sins (v. 31), sins of the mouth (gossip, slander), etc.

And Paul is not saying that every person commits each of these sins. The point of the apostle is to highlight the extent of human depravity. People are “filled with” and “full of” all manner of sin. This language points to the idea of having reached a saturation point, almost as if to say that they can’t possibly get any worse. They’ve already filled up the full array and depth of human depravity.

We know that many live outwardly moral and civil lives, all the while that they reject Christ and the gospel. This is due to God’s common grace by which the Holy Spirit enables otherwise evil people to do seemingly good things. But being the recipient of common grace does not save anyone. Salvation comes to those who by God’s special grace are awakened to their need of a Savior and put their trust in Jesus.

Two Sins in Particular (v. 30)

From among the 21 sins mentioned, I want to highlight two.

First, Paul describes these people as “*haters of God*” (v. 30). Some of you may be inclined to push back on this. I’ve heard people say, “Wait a minute. I’ve got a lot of non-Christian friends and family members and they don’t hate God. They don’t trust him or believe in him, but there is no hatred in their hearts.” I’m sorry to have to break the news to you, but you’re wrong. They do hate him. If you press them as to why they remain in unbelief, it isn’t for lack of evidence of his existence. Paul refuted that notion back in vv. 18-23.

The reason for their unbelief is that they deeply despise the suggestion that this God deserves their unconditional obedience. They may say it quietly and with little evidence of anger. But deep down inside they bristle with defiance and are repulsed by the notion that their lives are worthy of eternal damnation.

Second, again in v. 30, he refers to them as “*inventors of evil.*” This is remarkable. It isn’t enough simply to commit the normal array of sins we see in fallen humanity; they have to create some new ones of their own. They search out new ways of expressing their disdain for God. They take great delight in discovering fresh ways of defying God and his will. This is the consequence of being given over by God to a deeper cultivation of one’s sinful passions. After a while, the regular routine of sin isn’t enough to satisfy the soul. The “debased mind” says, “I crave even more horrendous and more perverted acts of sin than anything I’ve experienced until now.”

Moral Corruption Loves Company (v. 32)

It is stunning to note that “despite their rejection of the true God and the darkening of their understanding (vv. 21-23), that they are still keenly aware of God’s disapproval of their behavior” (Schreiner, 99). Indeed, they know “God’s righteous decree” that people who indulge in such behavior are “worthy of death”. Yet, the depth of their depravity is even greater, for “not only do they continue to practice evil that they know deserves God’s sentence of death, but they also ‘give commendation to those who practice these things’” (Schreiner, 99).

They know that what they are doing is evil. But they don’t care. They find some way to justify it. They are fully aware that God has decreed and commanded the opposite of what they practice. They don’t sin out of ignorance. There is no possibility of someone vindicating himself by saying: “Oh, my, if only I had known that these things were bad, I would never have committed them.” No. They know it.

Not only do they know that these are actions and attitudes that God forbids; they are fully aware that this sort of sinful behavior is worthy of eternal damnation. What has become of the claim by many that they don’t believe in God? They do believe he exists. They just hate him. They don’t like being told what to do and what not to do. Their

own selfish desires demand that they indulge themselves in whatever they think will bring the greatest pleasure.

Here is where it gets even worse. Not only does the wicked delight in his sin. Not only does he know that his actions warrant divine and eternal judgment. He actually applauds and encourages others to participate in his madness!

They are keenly aware of the reality of final judgment and hell. But would they take this view if they really understood what was at stake? Yes. Such is the depth of their hatred of God that not even the reality of eternal damnation is sufficient to turn them away from sin and to righteousness.

And they aren't content simply to sin on their own. They want company. You would think, wouldn't you, that people who hate God would at least have the common decency to hope that others might avoid the judgment that they themselves will suffer? You would think that at minimum they would display a measure of concern for the eternal welfare of family and friends and thus warn them about the consequences of this sort of behavior.

But, no. They obviously hate other people just like they hate God, for although they know that if others practice these things they will also suffer eternal damnation, they solicit their involvement anyway. They lie about the consequences. "Just enjoy yourself. There is no judgment. There is no hell." They not only encourage others in the practice of these things, they tell them that it is morally ok. They "give approval" (v. 32) to it.

But why are such practices worthy of eternal judgement? Is it all that big of a deal? It isn't just the act itself or the evil practice considered on its own. It is the fact that such actions are taken in defiance of God. Do you understand what people are saying when they sin? They are saying, in effect, "God, you are worthless! You don't merit my obedience. You aren't worthy of my affection. There is nothing about you that appeals to me or would lead me to believe that following you and your prescription for life is better and more satisfying than indulging in these many vices."

If you think that such behavior and disbelief isn't all that bad and certainly doesn't justify eternal damnation, I can only say that you have a horribly deficient view of God and his glory. If you think that these expressions of sinful behavior are mere minor blips in life, harmless decisions that don't really matter much in the big picture, you have failed to properly weigh the immeasurable, unfathomable, infinite majesty and beauty and splendor and holiness of God. *You will never see sin for what it really is until such time as you see God for who he really is.*

Furthermore, it isn't simply that misery loves company. It is more than simply wanting others to join you, as if their complicity in these sins makes you feel better about yourself, or perhaps is a way of justifying such sins to your own soul. They approve of others doing the same and encourage them in it because deep down inside they hate other people almost as much as they hate God. People are bent and determined not only to bring judgment on themselves, but they congratulate and encourage others in the doing of those things they know will result in their judgment as well.

Let's be crystal clear about what Paul is saying concerning human nature apart from God's saving grace. Back in vv. 18-23 Paul spoke of the knowledge all have that there is a God and that he is all-powerful, the source of all good things, deserving of our gratitude, and one who should be honored and worshiped. Here he focuses more on "moral" knowledge. They not only know there is a God, they not only know what he is like, they not only know they should thank and worship him, but they also know what he wants, what he has decreed to be good and bad. They also know that their refusal to obey merits eternal damnation.

Conclusion

What hope is there, then, for this fallen race of mankind? We saw the answer back in vv. 16-17. It is in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Why does the gospel give us hope? It gives us hope because "it is the power of God for salvation to

everyone who believes.” But how does it save us? How does it deliver us from the well-deserved wrath of God? It saves us in that it grants to us through faith the one thing that is required, the one thing we lack and could never produce on our own: the righteousness of God himself!

And what hope is there for those who have a “debased” mind (v. 28)? The answer is found later in Romans 12:2 where Paul exhorts us not to be conformed to this world but to be “transformed by the renewal” of our minds. God has graciously given to hell-deserving sinners like you and me his very righteousness. He has imputed to us or reckoned to us the righteousness of God as seen in Jesus himself so that when he looks on us he sees only the righteousness of Christ.

But he doesn’t stop there. Through the progressive transformation of our lives by the power of the Holy Spirit, he renews our minds. He enables us to think properly and to evaluate accurately truth and error. He enables us to understand and enjoy all that he is for us in Jesus.

Both good and evil only make sense if the God of the Bible exists and is who he says he is. If there is no God, on what basis does Paul or anyone else draw the moral conclusions he does? There has to be an eternal, transcendent, objective standard of good in order for these actions to be deemed evil. At the same time, the only reason there are people who consistently practice the opposite of these sins is because God has awakened them to himself and empowered them by his grace.

What reason, then, can any of us give for not finding ourselves in this descriptive list of debased and depraved behavior? The only answer is God’s saving grace in and through Jesus Christ! Praise be to his name!