



Foolish Unbelief

Romans 1:21-25

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This morning we will be looking at Romans, chapter 1, specifically verses 21-25. Paul is continuing in his argument about the bad news, the bad news of the estate of man outside of Christ, because as we saw last week, it is only by understanding the bad news and our need that we come to see the good news of the gospel and our need of Jesus Christ.

This morning we will be looking, as I said, at verses 21-25. I'd like to begin our reading, though, at verse 18 for our context. Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. For the Word of the Lord is completely without error, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 1, beginning at verse 18.

"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever!"

Thus ends the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, we pray that you would open our eyes. We pray, O Lord, that you would convict us of our sin, that we might see our need for a Savior, that we cannot go a day without the Lord Jesus Christ. Today, indeed, is the day of salvation. Today, indeed, is the day to grow in Christ. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

Last week we looked at God revealing himself to everyone in creation. Paul told us that revelation was clear. *Plain* is the word he used. In that revelation, God made known not only his existence but his nature. It was revealed to all. So that leaves all without excuse. Our next question that would come would be... *Why is everyone without excuse?* What are we supposed to do with this knowledge of God that is revealed in creation?

As we will see over and over again in the book of Romans, Paul looks at us when we ask that question and says, "I'm glad you asked that. Let me turn to that point and answer it." What Paul is about to address next is

what we are to do with the knowledge we are given. We are not to suppress the knowledge of God in unbelief but, rather, we are to acknowledge God as God. He is going to continue along this train of thought, explaining to us what unbelief looks like, what it looks like to suppress the truth of God.

We'll see it in three ways this morning. First, we will see *unbelief's expression*, what unbelief looks like, how it expresses itself. Secondly, we see *unbelief's substitution*, that unbelief substitutes other things for God and the worship of God. Finally, we see *unbelief's result*, what happens to those who do not believe but rather suppress the truth in unrighteousness. Unbelief's expression, unbelief's substitution, and unbelief's result.

Unbelief's Expression

Let's turn now to verse 21. After Paul has set the stage for us in this opening section, beginning at verse 18, he has said that all are without excuse, and verse 21 begins with a causal phrase. "For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him..." The very first word in verse 21 is, I think, a bit stronger than our English word *for*. It is often translated *because* or *on account of*.

Our word *for* can mean that as well, but the point I want to make here is that Paul is connecting verse 21 and following with verses 18-20. What is happening here is people have the knowledge of God revealed to them, and they are without excuse because they do not treat it as they ought. Paul says instead, even though they knew God, they did not honor him or give thanks to him.

Notice how clear Paul is. He doesn't say they *should* have known God. He doesn't say they *could* have known God. He says they *knew* God. He places all the emphasis on the sinner. It's not that God has failed here. It's not that there was some kind of possibility of revelation. No. Rather, God *has* revealed himself to the world, and because of that everyone knows God.

The problem arises in unbelief. The first thing Paul tells us about unbelief is that the unbeliever refuses to treat God as God; that is, as he has revealed himself. If God is who he has revealed himself to be, who he says he is...the Sovereign One, eternal, all-powerful, the Creator of all things...then it is up to people to treat him in that fashion, to treat him as the sovereign, eternal, all-powerful Creator.

Paul puts it this way. He says we owe him honor but we do not give it to him. Now what does it mean to honor God? The Greek word behind this word for *honor* is a word you're familiar with. The word is *doxa*. One of the things we will do a bit later in our service is sing the Doxology. It is a song of praise to God for who he is. The opening line is, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." Paul says we are to honor God. We are to praise God for who he is. We are to glorify God.

The root of this word *doxa* actually comes from a word that means an opinion, but over the years, as it was developed, it came to mean only a good opinion or a right opinion, not just any old opinion. What we get here is the idea that we are to worship God because he is worthy because of who he is. That's actually where

we get our English word *worship* from. It is *worth-ship*. Try to say that three times fast, and you'll realize why our word has become *worship* not *worth-ship*.

The idea here is we honor God with our praise and worship because he is God incarnate. He is God himself. He is the Creator of all things. A failure to worship God comes from a suppression of the truth about him. That's what Paul is saying. He says sinners know who God is, but they suppress that truth. Therefore, they're without excuse. The evidence against them is their failure to glorify and honor him, because mankind rejects God and rejects his truth.

Why *is* that? Why do people reject God? The answer is they don't *want* God. They don't want his authority. They don't want someone to be sovereign over them. They don't want his standards. They don't want his law of perfection to be what they have to live up to. They don't want his all-knowing, all-seeing nature holding them accountable. Mankind doesn't worship God because they don't *want* God. It's not because they don't know who he is. They know full well who he is and they reject that.

We can see how this failure to worship God is dishonoring. We refuse to give God his due. We deny who he is when we fail to worship him and honor him. I want you to think just for a moment if you've ever had an experience where someone has not acknowledged you for who you are or what you have done. Doesn't that bother you?

If you're very mechanical and know the inside and outside of an engine and someone looks at you and says, "Do you know where you put the gas in the car?" you say, "Wait a minute here. I could rebuild an engine blindfolded. Do you know who you're talking to?" They say, "Do you know anything about languages?" You say, "Wait a minute here. I learned three languages in college. Do you have any idea who you're talking to?"

"Well, I was wondering about the house here. I don't know if anyone has any ideas about how to decorate."

"Well, you do know I'm an interior decorator, don't you? Have you looked at my house? Have you ever been and seen how everything goes together?"

We bristle at that. Imagine how God reacts when, as the Giver of all life and the Creator and Sustainer of the entire universe, his creation fails to acknowledge who he is. It's nothing short of rebellion. It's unfair. It's unjust. I know often we don't think about our injustice against God, but that's exactly what this is. God must hold in our minds and in our affections the place his perfect nature and accomplishments deserve. When we fail to do that, we dishonor God.

The second aspect of unbelief is described by Paul as a sinful people's lack of their relationship with God that expresses itself in their not being thankful. Paul says they do not give thanks to him. This is another lack in the sinner. Not only do people fail to honor God and praise him as he deserves, but they don't even thank

him. If we think about this, a failure to honor God has a perspective toward God. It is Godward, but thankfulness is much more practical. It should be something that should be innate and obvious to us. It is something we learn that is essential in our lives.

Perhaps when you were younger you were like me or perhaps you're young right now. You had the one dreaded part of a birthday. You have your birthday and there's cake, and that's wonderful, and maybe ice cream, and you open presents and you're all excited and everything is great. Then usually what happens is Mom looks at you and says, "You do know you need to sit down and write those thank you notes." Oh! "Aw, Mom, I'll get to it later."

"No, you won't, because we both know if you don't do it now you're going to forget and you're not going to do it."

"Mom, why do I have to do that?"

Because it's what you do. When someone blesses you, someone encourages you, someone gives to you, you thank them. That's what you do. To not do that is wrong. It's not just that you help them by thanking them, you encourage them by thanking them. If you fail to thank them, you are showing you don't care. You don't care about them, you don't want them in your life, and you could do just as well without them. That's what thanklessness looks like.

The interesting thing is this is the sinister nature of unbelief. When we think of unbelief we think of some kind of militant atheist, screaming curses at God, being militant in their hatred of God, but really, what Paul says is it begins with being thankless, saying, "I don't need God. He's unimportant." In a sense, this is worse than a failure to honor him. Os Guinness puts it this way: "Rebellion against God does not begin with the clenched fist of atheism but with the self-satisfied heart of the one for whom 'thank you' is redundant."

We don't feel that we need to thank God, because thankfulness requires a commitment. It requires a commitment to remembering who we are, what our needs are, and how God has met those needs. That's why thankfulness is a central part of prayer for the Christian. Over and over again Paul is encouraging us not just to prayer generally but to be thankful, to bring all of our requests to God with thankfulness.

In Colossians 2 he tells the Colossians to continue steadfastly in their thankfulness. It shows the difference between those who know and serve God and those who suppress the truth and rebel. I think two examples from Scripture will help illustrate this point. You remember when Moses went into Egypt and the Israelites were looking for freedom and God used Moses to deliver the Israelites out of slavery.

You would think that for the rest of their days the Israelites would be thankful for that deliverance, but a short period of time goes by and they're no longer thankful. As a matter of fact, they say to Moses, "Let us go back

into bondage. We don't need this freedom." This was the story of the exodus. It was, "Well, we need food," and then God provides manna and they say, "Well, we don't really like that food. We want different food." It's constantly, over and over again, them criticizing God and failing to be thankful for the water he gave them, for the food he gave them, for the leadership he gave them, for the life he gave them.

We see this also in the New Testament, when Jesus comes and sees 10 lepers by the side of the road and heals them. They go off, and do you remember? How many of the 10 came back to say "Thank you"? One. I'm no statistician, but that's not a very good batting average. That's not a very good winning percentage. That's not a very good return on investment: 10 percent. You see, 90 percent of the lepers were thankless. They didn't see the need to thank God for the blessing he had given to them. This is a sign of unbelief.

Instead of honoring God, instead of being thankful, unbelievers suppress the truth and replace it with falsehood. It's not just a failure on their part to think truly and correctly. It is, instead, replaced by a darkness, by a perversion. Paul puts it this way: they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Their way of thinking, Paul is describing, is their reasoning. It is their opinion. It is their dialogue with God, as it were. That's where we get the word *dialogue*: reasoning and opinion.

Instead of being wise, they become foolish. It's vain. It is worthless, because apart from God people are unable to understand reality. A darkness comes not just over the mind but over the heart. This explains the next step we see in the world around us, that people not only dishonor God, they not only abuse God, but they do so to their fellow man. They're thankless. They don't honor others. This is an expression of unbelief.

Unbelief's Substitution

Now because this misunderstanding of God is rooted in rebellion and not in a lack of knowledge, we see that what happens is unbelievers replace the truth of God with a lie. There is a substitution of unbelief. This is not an accident. This is not a tentative mistake people make sometimes. Like if you were putting together a piece of furniture and you spread out and see all of the different sized nuts and bolts and washers and just kind of hope you pick up the right one and put it in the right spot.

If you make a mistake... "Well, let's hope we don't have pieces leftover and that it stays together." That's an innocent mistake, as it were. Rather, Paul says claiming to be wise, they became fools. This word here for *claim* has the connotation of shouting from the rooftops. It's a bold declaration. It's them walking around saying, "We are wise because there is no God, and we will not honor him and we will not thank him."

What is it that they claim? They claim they are sophisticated and wise. They claim they are in the right and that they have no need for God or his truth. Now I ask you this. Does this sound anything like our culture, where people are saying all the time that they have advanced past the need for a religion, past the need for God, past the need for the Bible and revelation? We've achieved so much intellectual superiority we don't need God anymore. This is the way unbelief substitutes a lie for the truth.

We have to understand this is not just making a bad choice without having all the information. We do that all the time. We take a wrong turn down a road because we don't know exactly where we're going. We pick the wrong school to go to because we didn't realize they might not have the major we would change to. We buy the wrong gadget and are sure it will help us, and then once we get it home we realize not so much. That's not what's going on here. Rather, there is a moral element to foolishness.

That's why Jesus tells us not to call someone *fool*. It's not just a statement about their intellect; it's a statement about their heart and their morality. In the Bible, to be a fool is not just to be unknowing but to be morally suspect, to be wicked. We even get that from the connotation in our own language of the word that is used in Greek for fool: *moron*. You don't throw that word around lightly, do you? You don't use that in polite society, do you? Because there's an edge to that word.

Paul is saying this is the kind of foolishness that has grabbed unbelievers. They think they're wise, but they're making themselves morons. They are fools because there is a great danger in rejecting God. I think oftentimes in our world today we view our relationship with God as being very static, that we're standing in one place observing God and able to observe where he is and whether we will approach him or not.

The reality of life is you are never standing still. You are always moving in one direction or another. This is kind of like fish that are always swimming. They never stop. If these kinds of fish stop, you know they're dead, because they've stopped. What happens here is we're always moving in one direction or another, so we think we know better. We think we know everything is okay, but the truth is we are going farther and farther away from God, away from the truth, away from reality and life.

There is a warning here in Scripture that the longer you wait to acknowledge God, the longer you wait to honor him, the longer you wait to thank him, the more danger you are in. That's not because the judgment of God gets more real. It's actually because the longer you wait the less sensitive you are to judgment. The more secure you are in your rebellion, the more you have suppressed the truth. To use our analogy from last week, the more comfortable you are with hearing the music on the car radio and don't hear the engine falling apart. That's what happens.

So just how foolish can people get? How far can they fall away from reality? Paul says they will still worship, but now, instead of worshiping the Creator, they will worship the creature. Imagine that. Paul says, "They have exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." Imagine thinking something that is made is worthy of worship while thinking God is *not* worthy of worship, the one who is the Creator and Sustainer of all things.

We do realize that God not only created the universe and all that is in it; but for the word of his power it would all disintegrate into nothing. Scientists call this the *second law of thermodynamics*. What it basically means is everything that has energy loses energy. Everything that has order starts to fall apart and lose order.

God stops the world from spinning itself into oblivion by his sustaining power, yet people will worship things that are created.

Do you see the way Paul pushes the argument here? He says, "You won't worship God, but you will worship not only things but you will worship the images of things that *look* like things." Notice the trail he takes us down. They'll worship mortal men. They'll worship birds. They'll worship creeping things. We go from the Creator and Sustainer of the universe to images fabricated and then down the scale of creation. We start at man, we move to animals, and eventually we're down to bugs. People are worshipping bugs.

Lest you think that's crazy and would never happen, all you need to do is look in the history books. Every sort of animal and reptile and insect on earth has been worshiped at one time or another by one people or another, because once you abandon the worship of God you substitute something else for it. Now, there should be a reminder here to us in what Paul says. "They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for creeping things." This is exactly the way of sin.

Isn't this exactly what happened in the garden of Eden? Adam and Eve exchanged the worship of God and the truth of God for the lie from Satan. This is exactly the way of sin. How foolish is this? What does this mean, that people substitute the creature for the Creator? It means the idea we have sometimes that people naturally seek God is just wrong. People aren't trying to find God. People don't fail to believe in God because they just haven't been able to find him. No, Paul says they *know* God.

The reality is people are running *away* from God. They're seeking something else to fill the hole only God can fill in their life. Where do *you* find meaning in life? The truth is still the truth whether you believe it or not. You can't change reality according to your desires. Let me tell you, if you could, the world you lived in would be awfully different, because I would change a couple of things. You just can't.

Jesus came to save us from our sin, but he also came to reveal the true God to us. He came to confront us with the reality of who God is, that God is all-powerful, that God is all-knowing, that he is the Creator of all things. Thank the Lord that Jesus Christ has come to dispel away the fog that envelops us, to do away with our measly substitutes. Instead, Jesus tells us there is only one true and living God, and we are to worship him.

Unbelief's Result

So what happens if we do not embrace God? What happens if we continue to substitute foolishness and vanity for wisdom and glory? Well, the next verse is one of the most frightening verses in all of the Bible. Look at verse 24. "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves..." The reason this verse is so frightening is because this is how the wrath of God is revealed at first.

You remember we looked at wrath last week and said that wrath is not an explosion of emotion, but we *did* say it's like the building up of judgment behind a dam, that God's wrath will be poured out. When we think about wrath, we think there's no way we are ever going to miss the wrath of God. Right? It's like fire on the mountain. It's like earthquakes and thunder. It's flood over the whole earth. It's consuming the earth with fire. You're not going to sleep through the wrath of God. Right? That's what we think.

But the wrath of God is actually first revealed in *this* way: not by God pouring out his wrath but, instead, by letting us go our own way. You see, the problem with the former view of wrath is that we believe as long as things are quiet we're okay. Doesn't this happen at home, kids? When Mom or Dad is really upset, you know, when their face gets kind of beet red, when Dad has that vein bulge on his forehead, you know you're in trouble. You just want a place to hide. You know there's no getting out of it.

But if Dad is *not* upset and there's no vein, Mom's face is *not* red but pleasant, you could walk around thinking, "Everything is fine. I'm not in any trouble at all." That doesn't have to be the case. You actually *could* be in trouble. If your parents are anything like *my* parents, they may have let you put the noose around your own neck. They may, what we parents call, "play along with you."

"Oh, where were you this afternoon? Oh, you were studying. What did you study? I wonder if I could see that book. Who did you study with? Could I talk with them? Maybe I should talk to *their* parents and see how the study session went. What did you eat when you studied?" All the while, the beads of sweat are coming down your head, because you know you weren't studying.

In this sense is what we see the wrath of God. God is leaving sinners to their own device. Now this seems odd. Why would God allow sinners to continue on in their rebellion? Doesn't he owe it to us to stop us from sinning? The Bible has a frightening answer to that. It's "No." God doesn't owe it to you to stop you from sinning. If he stops you from sinning, it is entirely of his grace and mercy.

That's why Paul begins verse 24 with, "Therefore." Because sinners have suppressed the truth and because they have exchanged the immortal God for the creature and because they do not honor and thank God...because of *that* God gives them up. That word *therefore* is the same word that's used at the beginning of verse 21. It's just as much causation. Because of that, God gives them up. The word here to *give up* means to hand over, to deliver, to entrust.

We often think of God as being very passive. There was a story going around social media a few months ago when there were those tragedies in the schools. The statement went something like this: "O God, why could you let this happen in a school? How could you let these deaths occur at these schools? How could you allow violence in schools?" The supposed answer from God was, "Well, you wouldn't let me come in the school, so I'm just sitting here on the side, and that's what you get."

That's not what Paul says God is like. God isn't passive, standing by. He's not doing what sometimes we parents do, where we stand and go, "Do you really think that's going to work, kids? All right, go ahead. Let's see what happens." That's not how God is. God actually confirms them in their sin. He gives them over to their sin. He is active in his judgment. If that doesn't frighten you, it should. That you could be getting exactly what you want and it could be the worst possible thing for your soul.

Imagine it this way. Imagine a person who has sky-high cholesterol, but they don't want to go to the doctor, and when a friend wants to come up to them and ask them to get a blood test or to do something, their response is along the lines of suppressing the truth. They put their fingers in their ears and say, "I'm not listening! I can't hear you!" They proceed to sit down at the table and eat fried chicken with french fries and deep-fried okra. Because let's face it. Everything is better deep fried.

They are just gleefully away eating all of this food, not giving any thought to their health or their cholesterol. They're getting what they want. Right? But it's the worst possible thing for them, and they don't realize it's the worst possible thing for them, so they continue down that road. That's a picture of how the sinner loves sin, and God confirms them in their sin. That's why this is so frightening, because what do sinners want? What sinners want, Paul says, is filth. He uses the word *lust* toward impurity.

That's what sinners want. They want filth. They want dishonor. They want things that are devaluing. That describes in a nutshell the life of a sinner: taking the good things God has given and squandering them. But the downward spiral of sin does not stop at behavior. It's not just what sinners do. It certainly is bad that sinners seek out more sin and think that's what's best for them, but it is even worse in this sense that God allows sinners to be confirmed in their idolatry.

God not only delivers them to their desires; he delivers them to their idolatry. That actually does happen. It's what Paul described in verse 23. "[They] exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things." This is what happens. Again, the frightening thing is that God doesn't leave us there; he gives us over to our sin, which drags us even farther away from God.

Now what could be more far from God than that? What do we think of when we think of idolatry? We think about people dancing around a totem pole. Right? Or maybe people worshipping a big mountain. What could be farther from God than that? How about a sophisticated rejection of God? How about a substitute for God that pleases us and soothes our intellect?

You see, what sinners must do is trade the truth for a lie. It began in the garden and it continues to this day. So here is the question...*Is there any hope for such sinners?* Paul is giving us a lot of bad news. Is there any hope for those who are blind, rebellious, running away from God? In a word, yes. There is hope because even though we have embraced the lie, God has sent us his Son, who is Truth himself, to bring us back to God.

Even though we have been fools, Jesus, the wisdom of God, wipes away the scales from our eyes. Even though we do not honor God and are unthankful, Jesus confronts us with the mercy and grace of God and shows us the real and true God, worthy of our worship. This is what the Lord has done for foolish unbelievers. This Jesus is the answer for a world that is lost in lies and darkness. He is the hope of the world. Let us together commit today to bringing Jesus to a world that needs him now more than ever.