



When Sin is Set Loose

Romans 1:26-32

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I'd like to begin our Scripture reading this morning at verse 24 for a bit of 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 it is the Word of the Lord that is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 1, beginning at verse 24.

"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! Amen. For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error. And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it. O Lord our God, we ask this morning that you would open up your Word to us, that in your Word we might see the Lord Jesus Christ, we might see our need for Jesus and your provision. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

In this first chapter of the book of Romans, we have been looking at the downward spiral of sin. It is important for us to know and to remember that this downward spiral begins with rejecting God. The Bible shows us that all know God. All know God from his work of creation, but most people refuse to acknowledge God. They refuse to honor God. They prefer to believe a lie and to worship the creature rather than the Creator. For this reason, God gives them up to their sin.

Sin As Judgment

He gives them up, first and foremost, Paul tells us in verse 24, to their passions, to the lusts of their hearts to impurity. They cannot control themselves. They do not see that God has placed boundaries in life, so they run to excesses in their passions. They abuse things that are good and use them in a wrongful way. Now we are about to see the next two steps in the downward spiral.

It is not just that passions run wild in sinners. No, it is passions that are contrary to nature itself, a depraved way of acting, a depraved way of thinking. This is important, because we do not always see sin in this fashion. We're used to thinking about sin as something God judges. Here Paul is actually telling us sin is also a judgment from God. The very sin that sinners participate in is a judgment that comes from God. God gives sinners over to sin, and it consumes them. This sin itself is a sign of judgment.

This should give us great pause, because our tendency is to see sin only as something that is punishable. So if it doesn't appear to be punished before us, we think what we're doing is not all that bad. We even see this in our homes. Our children are very familiar with and very aware when they cross a boundary at home, when they disobey and are punished.

Perhaps you have heard it is critically important to parenting to be consistent in your punishment or judgment, because if your children begin to do something you believe is disobedience and you do nothing about it, they just assume it's fine. "If it was really bad, Mom and Dad would punish me. Since they're not, I must be okay in what I'm doing." This is dangerous when we begin to treat sin this way.

Paul says here that sin *is* the punishment. It is what sinners are given over to. Sin let loose is not God ignoring the rebellion of man. It is, instead, God judging that rebellion. Again, this tells us something about the nature of sin. We think of sin as something that's not really so bad or so harmful. It's just something God doesn't like very much, but the truth is sin is bad for us. It destroys our relationships. It destroys our health. It destroys our humanity. Sin is much worse than we think.

Paul gives a clear example of what this abandonment by God looks like. He says in verse 26, "For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions." He calls these passions *dishonorable*. That means these activities bring disgrace upon the sinner. They bring shame. There is humiliation in feeding these passions. Then he begins to get very specific.

This is a difficult passage for us, but we have to understand the Bible tells us this for a reason. We cannot think we are smarter than the Bible and know what God should and should not say. This is a hard topic to broach with young children in the room, but Paul mentions this because it is something that is critical. It is difficult with young children because moral people don't talk about these kinds of actions. We don't bring them out into the public.

It's also hard because our society is so given over to dishonoring God this behavior is now seen as something to be honored and emulated. Paul is now talking about homosexuality, about denying the natural order of men and women together. Interestingly, Paul begins not with the Bible, not by saying this is unbiblical, but by saying it is unnatural. Why does he do this? It's not that the Bible is not important, and the Bible certainly has a great deal to say about this topic.

Rather, I think he wants to show us no one has any excuse for engaging in this kind of behavior. It is common sense to all of us. Think about it. We see papa dogs and mama dogs. We see papa cats and mama cats. We see papa bears and mama bears. I don't advise you get close to them. We see in all of nature, in all of the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the animals of the land... It is obvious for all of us to see there is a distinction between male and female.

Paul actually does something interesting in this text. He does not use the word for men and women. He uses the word for male and female, because he is tying it to nature. That's another word he's using. It's the same word we get *physics* from. When you study physics in school, you're studying the laws of nature. That's what Paul is talking about. He's saying all you have to do is look out in creation, and you can see what is against nature.

This makes the rebellion of men even more obvious. There are currently many so-called Bible scholars who are working to say we've misunderstood Paul. The words seem pretty plain to me, but they say, "Paul is just taking this out of context, and this is just one passage in the Bible. We surely don't have to submit to Paul on this." The fact is that this is *not* out of context and it is *not* the only passage in the Scriptures.

We have the witness of the Old Testament in Genesis with the story of Sodom, the story in Judges of Gibeah. We have direct prohibitions in the book of Leviticus, in Leviticus 18, in Leviticus 20. Actually, lest someone comes to you and says, "Well, we don't have to worry about what is said in Leviticus because that's the Old Testament," I want to tell you Paul takes the exact same language from Leviticus and repeats it here in Romans in the New Testament.

There are others who are plain about this. They say, "The Bible is wrong. We just shouldn't follow this." We should, to use a phrase of the age, "follow our hearts" and not care what God says. In our society, then, it should not surprise us this area is an area of the greatest attack upon the church. Think about the banning of Christian organizations, like InterVarsity, from universities because they refuse to put those who are in rebellion against God, as evidenced by their participation in this sin of homosexuality, in leadership of their organization. They dare to have biblical standards for a biblical group.

Think about attacks upon marriage in this country. It's not just attacks upon marriage between a man and a woman. We can't just allow so-called gay marriages to occur. We have to promote them. We have to praise them. We have to think they are great expressions of love and kindness and peace. It's not that you must stand by. No, you must cheer. You *will* bake the cake. You *will* play the wedding. You *will* rent out the venue. There is no option given.

Actually, it's interesting the way this comes out. It's like Paul is living in our very day and age, because nature in our age has been given up. Families are discarded. Marriage is passé. Commitment is a thing of the past. I spoke with someone this morning who is getting ready to celebrate their fifty-fifth wedding anniversary. How

many people do you know who have celebrated 50? Thirty? Twenty? We live in a day and age in which it is the exception to only be married once. Commitment is a thing of the past.

If there's one rule in our society today it's this: everything goes, and don't try to stop it. As a result, what happens, Paul says, is those who are given to this sin receive in themselves the due penalty of sin. We could talk about the health ramifications of homosexuality. We could talk about how our society is being stretched to the breaking point, but I want you to stop for a moment and think about what this has done in our society to women, to children, to the family.

The damage is obvious to be seen. Rebellion against God does not go well. We can think we can get what we want, but the problem is we don't realize that when we get what we want it destroys us. That's the nature of sin. I say to you here this morning you may be sitting here struggling with this sin or you may know a friend or a family member who is struggling with this sin. What you need to know is that all sin is rebellion against God, and the Bible tells us this so we can run away from sin and run toward Jesus.

To struggle with this sin is not the end of everything. It does not put you beyond the grace of God, but the loving thing to do is to confront sin, *all* sin, and to say it is against God's law and that Jesus died so you might be free from sin. That is especially true when we are talking about a sin that so clings to our being, that becomes such a part of who we are we think we can never give it up. Jesus says you can. "I died so you can."

Paul then moves to his third statement of God giving up sinners. He has not only talked about depraved behavior, but now he talks about a depraved mind. Depraved behavior is easy to see, but there is something worse than depraved behavior. Sinners do not acknowledge God, and God gives them up to what Paul calls a *debased mind* in verse 28.

There is a clear connection between rejecting God and suppressing the truth and getting a debased mind. Verse 28 actually begins with a pronoun. You can't see it because it's the flow of the sentence, but in the Greek there is a pronoun. What that pronoun actually means is something like "To the degree that someone is like *this*, this is what they do." Paul is saying there is a relationship between rejecting the knowledge of God and being given over to a mind that is debased and depraved.

The behavior Paul has described in verses 26 and 27 flows out from this sin. Our sinful, depraved actions flow from a depraved mind. That is, it's not just that sinners are mistaken about sin. It's not just that they don't know who God is or they don't know what right is. No, Paul tells us they *do* know God (verse 21). They just refuse to acknowledge him (verse 28). This means their minds are debased or depraved.

This is more than an error or simply being foolish. It is actually thinking what is bad is good and what is good is bad. It's substituting the wrong thing for the right thing. You remember a few weeks ago we pondered what it was like to suppress the knowledge of the truth. An example I gave you was if someone did not want to

know they had sky-high cholesterol and proceeded to go about and eat fried everything, thinking it would have no effect on their cholesterol.

Well, this is even worse. If I could continue the analogy, this is like someone coming up to you and insisting that fried chicken is a health food and the best thing you can do for your body is fry everything. You should fry things twice just to be sure. "And you know what's bad for you?" they would say. "Water. You should never drink water. Water is horrible for you. Instead, eat fried fat and don't drink water."

If they're trying to tell us not just "I'm going to do this because I don't care" but "Because this is what's good for you; this is what all healthy people do," we would look and say, "You are nuts. Have you seen the effect of people eating a whole bucket of fried chicken every day? Have you seen what happens to their bodies? Have you seen what happens to their health? How could you say that's a health food?"

You see, this is what sinners do. They don't see the devastation sin wreaks in their life. They want more and more sin, and they call evil *good* and good *evil*, and they pursue wickedness. Because of this, their lives are a shamble. They don't consider that God is worthy of their thought and attention. As a result, God gives them over to a debased mind. It is a worthless mind.

What this word *debased* means... Paul uses it several times in the New Testament. It means you failed the test. You are rejected because you are worthless and don't work. It's kind of like if you took your car in for its annual inspection. If the car fails the inspection, what does that mean? It means you're not supposed to drive the car. It's not a valid car, as it were. It's not a safe car. Nobody should drive that car. You have to get it fixed and re-inspected so it passes the test.

Paul says here the mind God gives them over to is a debased mind. It has failed the test of thinking. It is worthless. Paul uses this word this way in 1 Corinthians: "I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be..." Here's the word. "...disqualified." Fail the test. Hebrews, chapter 6, when it's talking about a little bit more than gardening, talks about the land *this* way: "But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is..." Same word. "...worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned."

I don't know about you, but I don't cultivate weeds in my bushes and in my garden. They're worthless. They bring me no pleasure. They bring me no food. They actually starve the good plants. They are worthless. That's the kind of mind sinners are given over to. If we think about it, it's actually a perfect judgment from God, because what sinners are saying is, "We want to live without God; we want to live without his Word," so God gives them over to a mind that is worthless and will not see God and will not seek after him.

The worthless mind leads them to practice things that ought not to be done. It is important for us, therefore, to remember rebellion against God leads to more sin, more shame, and more problems. Sin is a judgment that

comes from God, but Paul wants to make sure no sinner has an excuse. Someone, even someone here, might say, "Well, I'm glad I don't fall into any of those categories. That sin Paul is describing in verses 26 and 27 doesn't apply to me. I'm safe."

Sin As a Way of Life

Paul says, "Not so fast." He then begins to list off all sorts of sins in all sorts of categories. Twenty-one, actually. He is describing this because rebellion against God and his Word causes sin to be everywhere. It is in all people. It is in all sorts of places in all types of things. As a matter of fact, we might consider this Paul's particular list he has in mind when he says in Romans 3, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

So where does Paul begin? He begins, first, generally with *wickedness*. We see this in verse 29, and we've also seen it before in verse 18. It is unrighteousness. It is behavior that flows from suppressing the truth. *Unrighteousness* is just what it sounds like: a lack of righteousness, a lack of justice. Have you ever wondered why there's injustice in the world, why criminals get off, why people do things that are wrong and aren't punished?

The reason there's injustice in the world is because of sin. It is the rejection of what is right by sinners, and what is right is determined by the character of God. Wickedness is everywhere we look because everywhere we look there is rebellion against God. He then moves on to other forms of wickedness. He begins to speak of *evil*, which is a general term for badness. It is the general inclination to do wrong things to try to get gain from it.

He then moves on to *covetousness*. If that's a long word that's new for you, you might know it under *this* word: *greed*. It is the desire to always want more, to never be satisfied, to think things will solve our problems. Things become a substitute for God. Our society is completely filled with this. There is an entire industry built upon covetousness and greed. It's called *advertising and marketing*. That industry is built upon telling you, "Don't be satisfied with what you have. You deserve more. You deserve better. Take what you have and throw it away and get this new version of the same thing."

If we think about it, things we *need* don't need to be advertised. You don't need to convince someone they should have air. You don't need to convince someone they need water. You might need to convince them they need fancy water in a fancy bottle with a fancy label, but you don't need to convince someone they need water. They just walk up to the sink and get water. Greed is something that is a part of our society.

So this is important for us, because before you too quickly think, "This doesn't apply to me. These are for bad people out *there*. I'm free from these sins. I don't have to worry about sin. I don't really need Jesus," think about your own desire for more, that you have to have that next phone. You have to have that new car. You have to have that toy you've been asking for. You have to have the vacation that'll make everything perfect. This is something that is built into our society.

The next thing Paul mentions is *malice*. This is a deliberate wickedness that delights in harming other people, even beyond any gain you might get from it. *Malice* is like the person in the parking lot with the key scraping a car just to do damage. Doesn't gain anything from it. It's the person throwing a rock through the window just because they enjoy it. They don't get any benefit from it. It's like the bully. Think about it. What does a bully gain from bullying except for making someone else miserable and getting pleasure from that misery? This is malice, Paul says. These are aspects of wickedness.

Paul then moves on to a second set of sins that focus on the hatred of others. He begins, "They are full of envy, murder, strife..." This is the second set because Paul uses a different grammatical construction. He says they are *full* of these things. The word for *full* here means to take up space, to fill it up, to fill it up such that we are characterized by something. Each of these sins relates to the *full of*, not just the first word.

He says, first, they're filled with *envy*. Envy is like greed, but I think perhaps it's even worse. Greed says, "I want" and envy says, "I want and you can't have. I want what *you* have. You don't deserve it." Next Paul begins to speak of *murder*. There's an interesting thing Paul does here. The word for *murder* sounds like the word for *envy* in Greek. They don't come from the same root. I'm not here to give you 101 Greek tips to impress your relatives with.

There's a relationship just from the sound. There are words that sound like the sound, like *buzz*. It sounds like the sound. These two words show us there is a relationship the way Paul is putting them together. Now why shouldn't there be? Envy is a cause of murder. As a matter of fact, envy was the cause of the *first* murder when Cain murdered Abel. Murder is something that our society, I think, is filled with.

We saw this just last week, how little life is valued in our society. It's like a game. People act as if they are playing in a giant video game where they imitate previous shootings. I don't know if you noticed, but many of the actions of the recent shooter in Santa Fe were modeled upon Columbine, even to the wearing of a trench coat. They make films of themselves and speak in manifestos. They care little about the harm and the pain they're doing to others.

We see the news reports afterward of the mother with her head in her hands or of people weeping and crying, but those who have no value for life couldn't care at all. People don't think about pain and suffering they put others through, whether it's school shootings or bombings in Austin or just random violence. This is sinful degradation.

Of course, we shouldn't forget our society is built upon murder. The scourge of abortion affects our society. It's not just that we permit it. No, no, no. The government has to pay for it as well. Now it's not just that it happens. I don't know if you've seen this recently. There is a tendency now for people to do what they call *shouting out* their abortions. They publicly pronounce that they're glad they've killed their child and that was the best thing that could have happened.

Can you imagine the barbarity of a society? Paul can. He tells us we're in that downward spiral. He then moves on to *strife*. *Strife* describes quarreling and wrangling. I don't need to teach you about strife. All you need to do is spend 15 minutes on Facebook, and you will see strife. You will see people arguing with each other over the smallest of things.

Paul says *deceit* is a part of this downward spiral, and deceit is treachery by words. It is trying to convince others something is true when it is not. Does that sound like our society? We see this all the time in business. It's actually considered a good business practice. Finally, Paul says they are full of *maliciousness*. Maliciousness is related to malice that we saw before, this kind of wickedness or evil that is done even apart from gain, but the word *maliciousness* here is the *habit* of malice. It is seeing who one is is malicious. You're set against others all the time.

Paul then works to a third set of sins. He says, "They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents..." All of these are a set of sins designed to make us appear better than we are. They appeal to our pride. *Gossip* is whispering against another, destroying another's reputation.

Gossip can find its way easily even into the church. It makes its way into the church under the guise of a prayer request. Someone says, "Y'all need to pray for her. Ooh, you don't know how horrible her marriage is. You need to pray for her." "Oh, you need to pray for him. You have no idea what he did at work. You need to pray for him." Gossip has no place in the life of a Christian.

Then Paul says some take it even a step further. *Slanderers*. *Slander* is gossip made public, spread abroad out loud. Then there is a whole set of sins describing the expression of rebellion against God: to be a God hater, to be insolent, to be filled with pride, to be haughty or arrogant, to think you are better than everyone else and not listen to anyone else, to be a boaster, someone who expresses their pride willingly, is glad to tell everyone how great they are.

Then even *disobedient to parents*. I'm sure there are some kids here scratching their heads and saying, "Wait a minute, Pastor. You mean disobeying my parents is like greed and envy and murder and slander?" Yes. Maybe not to the same degree as murder, but it still shows rebellion against God's order. You see, you obey your parents not because they deserve it or are worthy of it. It's because it's the natural order God has given to you.

I have a clue for you. Kids, hear me now. You're going to want the same from *your* kids when you have kids. That's how it works. You won't be any more worthy of obedience than you think *your* parents are. You see, once we start down a road of rebellion against God's order and rebellion against God, sin consumes us.

Finally, Paul uses a set of four words that show not just positive sins people are committing but actually a lack of what is in sinners. He uses four words, each with a vowel prefix. You know how we use the letter *A*. We say something is *asymmetrical*, which means it's not symmetrical. That's what Paul does here. The first thing he says is they are *foolish*. They are not discerning.

When he says sinners are foolish, he doesn't mean they're stupid and dumb. After all, many sinners are very clever in their wickedness. What he means is they don't have discernment about the things of God, so they are unknowing in this sense. He says they're *faithless*. This doesn't mean they are unbelieving. The word here is not the word for *to believe*. It is, rather, the word to *break trust*. They are faithless in the sense they break their word all the time. They're covenant breakers. They're no good for their word.

Then he says they're *heartless*. They're without natural affection, without love. We see this all the time in our society. We see fathers abandon their families, mothers abandon their children. He says they are *ruthless*. Literally, they are without mercy. They not only do not *show* mercy to others; they *feel* no mercy for others. This describes modern society. This is sin as a way of life.

One Way or the Other

The final verse, verse 32, takes us to the bottom of the pit. Again, Paul makes it clear that sinners are without excuse. He says, "Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die..." They know God. They know his righteous decree. They know the punishment for the sins they are committing, but you know what? They don't care.

What does this mean? It means they're beyond the reach of the law. If we're honest with ourselves, for many of us, in many aspects of our lives, we are restrained from breaking the law because we don't want the consequences. I'm going to take a wild stab in the dark and assume that some of us, if we knew a policeman would not give us a ticket, would not keep the speed limit.

You've probably said it just as I have. "Why is this road 35? You could easily drive 50 on this road. Why is this highway 55? I should at least be able to go 65." Yet why don't we speed? Because we don't want to get a ticket. We don't want the penalty. We don't want the fine. We don't want the consequences. What Paul is saying here is that these sinners are so far gone they don't care about the consequences. They *know* they're going to get the ticket. They *know* how much it costs, and they don't care anyway.

The sinner who has rejected God doesn't care about consequences. He has so little concern for God he doesn't even think about judgment. It's actually worse than that, because Paul says they not only do them (these practices) but they give approval to those who practice them. Knowledge of God's judgment doesn't bring about a hatred of sin for them.

They actually delight not only in sinning but in having others sin. They're bent not only on damnation for themselves; they want to bring other people along with them. What a hatred of ourselves and others is expressed by sin. Paul's description here of a world rebelling against sin is horrifying. It is like a living hell, like hell on earth: people acting like animals, like *less* than animals, against nature itself.

What hope is there? What we have to say is that man cannot be reformed. The answer is not more education. The answer is not more laws. The only answer is a complete renewal of the sinner by the grace of God. We were made in God's image, and in the fall that image was lost, and having lost that image we sink further and further into sin. That is why Jesus came and took on humanity. He became man to pay the penalty for our sin and restore in us the image of God.

Jesus in his life and death opened up the way for the image of God to be restored in us. Our hope is in Jesus. The bad news is that you are far worse than you think you are, but the good news is that the Lord knows that and he sent Jesus anyway. Will you trust him? Will you go to Jesus and admit you are a rebel? Will you trust that by his death he has paid the penalty for all of your horrible sins? If so, there is hope. There is actually *more* than hope. There is forgiveness and there is grace. Trust Christ, and God will redeem you from your sin.