

The Degrading Power of Sin: The Downward Spiral of Truth Suppression

Eric C. Coher

Romans 1:21-27

Romans 1:18-27 is quite possibly some of the most devastating Scripture in the entirety of the New Testament. In these 10 verses, Paul brings an indefensible case against all humanity that reveals the soul ravaging effects of sin and its consequences. What we see happening in these verses is the downward spiral of morality that takes place when we jettison the truth of God in order to live according to our own desires. Anthropologists who study the human race tell us that we are getting better; they tell us that we have come so far from our “primitive” beginnings. But that is not the same story that God’s word tells us. God’s word tells not of a physical, moral, and spiritual ascent of the human race, but rather of an ever-increasing downward spiral of morality.

What we read in Romans 1:18-27 is not a congratulations to the human race, but rather the sobering reality that as the truth of God’s word is rejected, so goes morality. Before we look at our text for this morning, I want us to back up to verse 18 so that we can see the full progression of Paul’s thought process. Writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul says, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.” And in case anyone were to ask, “Paul, how do we suppress the truth?” He continues saying, “For what can be known about God is plain [shining] to them, because God has shown [made it plain] it to them. For His invisible attributes, namely, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived [seen], ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they [truth suppressors] are without excuse.”

What Paul does, beginning in verse 21, is show us the destructive results of rejecting the absolute truth of God and choosing instead to go our own way, trying to define our own truth.

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! 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. Romans 1:21–27

1. TRUTH SUPPRESSION EVENTUALLY LEADS TO A REJECTION OF THE TRUTH GIVER. (vv.21-22)

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... Romans 1:21-22

Paul begins our text this morning by adding two more powerful charges against us. He says, "For although they knew God, they did not honor [glorify] Him as God or give thanks to Him." I want to deal with this text for a moment. Paul reiterates here the universal truth that he communicated in the previous two verses – that all men know God by way of His general revelation. God's nature, His character, and His attributes are on clear display in the created world for all men to see. God is saying that we cannot look at the universe without a clear understanding that there must be a Creator. We look at a sculpture and know that there is a sculptor, we look at a painting and know that there was a painter, we look at a building and know that there was an architect and a builder; how is it then that we can gaze at the expanse of creation and not see the fingerprints of an all wise, all powerful, Creator?

Paul tells us that we do see a Creator. All men know that God exists when they look at what God has made. The biblical reality is that men choose to reject the truth that they know about God because if a Creator exists and He created me, than I am accountable to Him and He is in control. This inescapable knowledge of God is enough light to cause all men to stand condemned, without excuse, and desperately in need of mercy and grace. Somewhere along the line you might have heard the question, "Why doesn't God make His truth clearer? Why doesn't He just write the gospel in the clouds?" If God were to write the gospel in the clouds, sinful men would refuse to look up. The sin of pride and "me-ism" has so infected our lives that some men would rather die than accept the truth of God and submit to His Lordship. And yet, God is patient and longsuffering, giving sinners underserved time to repent. But Paul warns those who reject God's truth when he says, "[Do not] presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance" Romans 2:4.

Not only do all men know that there is a Creator God to whom they are accountable, but all men are also aware that they have broken God's law. We know this because guilt exists and guilt is universal. Where does guilt come from? Paul tells us in Romans 2:15. He says that God has given us all a conscience and He has written the work of the law on every man's heart. That means that when Paul says, in verse 21, that men did not honor or give thanks to God, this was a conscious, willful decision to reject not only the truth of God, but God Himself. Can you see the progression that is taking place here? What we see in verse 18 is a suppression of the truth. What we are seeing here in verse 21 has progressed to a rejection of the truth - ultimately a rejection of the Truth Giver. How do we reject the Truth Giver:

A. WE REJECT THE TRUTH GIVER BY NOT GIVING HIM THE HONOR THAT HE IS DUE.

B. WE REJECT THE TRUTH GIVER BY NOT GIVING HIM THE THANKS THAT HE IS DUE.

To give you some contrast to Paul's indictment of those who fail to give honor and thanks to God, I want to share a brief excerpt of an article that I read this week written by Brian Solomon, a staff writer for Forbes Magazine. In this article, which will appear in next month's issue of Forbes, Brian Solomon interviews David Green, the Founder and CEO of Hobby Lobby. That name may or may not be familiar to you, but David Green is a professing evangelical Christian who, by God's grace, has been very "successful". But it's interesting that even though Forbes classifies Green as a "self-made" millionaire, he doesn't see himself that way. Listen to the heart of a man who acknowledges that all he has comes from God and therefore, ultimately, belongs to God:

Fresh off an inspection of Hobby Lobby's sprawling 5.5 million-square-foot distribution warehouse in Oklahoma City, the company's CEO, David Green, retreats to his office in the adjacent executive building, where he surrounds himself with a collection of homely elephant figurines. His coffee table is draped with a bird's-eye-view photograph of his corporate campus, annotated with scribbles in black marker that show the expansion under way. When I ask him to walk me through the secrets to his company's growth, which the aerial plans represent, the 70-year-old, with a full head of white hair, blue eyes and a prominent square jaw, doesn't take any personal credit. Nor does he laud his executives or his 22,000 employees or his customers, who will gobble up more than \$3 billion worth of crafts products from him this year. "If you have anything or if I have anything, it's because it's been given to us by our Creator," says Green, sweeping his hand over the acres laid out before him. So I have learned to say, "Look, this is yours, God. It's all yours. I'm going to give it to you."¹

In our pride, we oftentimes consume all that God has graciously provided, but fail to glorify Him and thank Him as if we are entitled to it and it is owed to us. God doesn't owe us anything. Every good thing that we have is an evidence of God's grace. Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:45, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." Not only does Paul tell us how we have failed to glorify God in verse 21, but he also reveals the sad consequences of a rejection of God's truth.

A. FUTILITY OF THINKING.

"They became futile in their thinking..." (v. 21a)

Futility here has the idea of worthlessness. When we reject God's truth, the very mind that He gave us to glorify Him with becomes worthless. In Jeremiah 2:5 God asks His people, "What wrong [fault] did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?" When men jettison the truth, all they can do is posit theories and create hollow philosophies to attempt to make any sense of their lives. A futile mind is like a demagnetized compass. It displays a heading, but it won't get you where you want to go.

¹ <http://www.forbes.com/sites/briansolomon/2012/09/18/david-green-the-biblical-billionaire-backing-the-evangelical-movement/>

B. DARKENING OF HEART.

“And their foolish [wicked] hearts were darkened...” (v.21b)

The heart here refers to the seat or center of the spiritual life. When we reject the truth, our hearts don't remain morally neutral, rather they grow in wickedness. Spiritually dark hearts and increased moral perversion are inseparable. They go hand in hand. Jesus reminds us of that in John's gospel when he says:

And this is the judgment [verdict]: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God. John 3:19–21

C. FALSE ASSESSMENT OF WISDOM.

“[Professing] Claiming to be wise...” (v. 22a)

There are many “professors” of wisdom in this world. Men who claim to possess knowledge, but cling to a worldview that is divorced from the truth of God. These men scoff at and mock the wisdom of God. Interestingly enough, Proverbs 3:34 says, “He [God] mocks proud scoffers, but gives grace to the humble.” Paul warned the church in Colossae when he said, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ” *Colossians 2:8*. In other words, be careful when you are trying to discern the wisdom of the world. What sounds good isn't always truth.

D. IN REALITY WE ARE DISPLAYING OUR FOOLISHNESS.

“They became fools.” (v.22b)

A fool is the man who outright rejects God. In Psalm 14:1, David said, “The fool says in his heart there is no God. They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds.” It is interesting to note that the Greek word for foolishness here is *moraino*. This is where we get our English word “moron”.

2. SINCE WE WERE MADE TO WORSHIP, A REJECTION OF GOD ALWAYS RESULTS IN A RELENTLESS SEARCH FOR A LESSER REPLACEMENT. (vv.23-25)

and [they] 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! Amen. Romans 1:23-25

The fundamental [core] problem with all of mankind is our failure to glorify God with our lives. This is the warring heart problem with which each of us struggle. What or whom will we worship? To what or whom will we ascribe glory? Two times, once in verse 23 and once in verse 25, Paul says that we make the futile mistake of exchanging, of cashing in, the glory of God for something infinitely lesser in value. We cannot help but to worship; God made us that way. We are a worshipper by design and therefore we must worship something or someone. John MacArthur highlights our worshipping nature when he says:

In their spiritual blindness, intellectual darkness, and moral depravity, men are by nature inclined to reject the Holy Creator for the unholy creature. Because something even in their fallenness demands a god, but one they like better than the true God, they devise deities of their own making.²

Though you probably don't have idols in the likeness of mortal man, birds, animals, and creeping things, sitting about your house, we are guilty of exchanging the glory of God for lesser replacements every day. We glory in our achievements, we glory in our positions, we glory in our possessions, we glory in our power, we glory in our appearance, we glory in our comfort, we glory in our approval, we glory in our finances, we glory in our performance, we glory in our knowledge, we glory in pleasure, we glory in our status, and we glory in entertainment. John Piper says, "If people were consumed with the glory of God instead of themselves, God would take care of the self."

Exchanging the glory of God for any lesser thing is the definition of sin. This is precisely what Paul labors to teach us two chapters over in Romans 3:23 when he says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." There is no problem in the universe greater than falling short of the glory of God. When you turn the TV on and watch the news and wonder what on earth is happening – this is the problem. This is the problem beneath all marriage problems, this is the problem beneath all parenting problems, this is the problem beneath all financial problems, this is the problem beneath all addictive problems, and the list goes on. Underneath every human expression of sin, be it sinful thoughts, sinful actions, sinful attitudes, sinful motives, or sinful desires, this fundamental problem exists. We have exchanged the glory of God for something that our faulty reasoning says we must have.

Notice that Paul points us to our immorality only after he has first pointed us to our idolatry. Look at verse 24, it begins, "Therefore... God gave them up in the lusts of the hearts [and] to impurity." We will come back to the reality of God giving men up to their sin in the next point, but "therefore" signals us to understand that the reason for God giving men up to their sin is because we are glory exchangers; we are idolaters. Sexual sin doesn't come first; idolatry comes first.

² John MacArthur, *Romans 1–8*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 91.

Pornography addictions are the result of a glory exchange, adultery is the result of a glory exchange, and homosexuality is the result of a glory exchange. Whatever it is that your heart treasures, it will worship. You were made to worship. Jesus reminds us of this in Matthew 6:21 when He says, “For where you treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

Did you know that out of the entire created order only man fails to glorify God? Everything else in the universe obeys and glorifies God. Psalm 19:1 tells us, “The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” Likewise, Psalm 104 is replete with examples of the created order obeying and honoring God. Turn over to Psalm 104:5-19. I want you to see how creation obeys and honors God.

He set the earth on its foundations, so that it should never be moved. You covered it with the deep as with a garment; the waters stood above the mountains. At your rebuke they fled; at the sound of your thunder they took to flight. The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place that you appointed for them. You set a boundary that they may not pass, so that they might not again cover the earth. You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills; they give drink to every beast of the field; the wild donkeys quench their thirst. Beside them the birds of the heavens dwell; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart. The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has her home in the fir trees. The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the rock badgers. He made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. Psalm 104:5–19

We get so consumed with ourselves that we fail to honor and glorify God as we ought. Look at verse 25 for a minute, I want you to notice something that you may not be aware of. Most English translations of the Bible (NSAB, ESV, NIV, KJV, HCSB) translate verse 25 to say, “Because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie,” but that is not exactly the way the Greek reads. A better translation, and the NKJV picks up on this, is to insert the definite article “the” before lie. The correct translation is actually, “Because they exchanged the truth of God for *the* lie. Now, what is the lie? It is the same lie that was told in the Garden. Remember, Satan told Eve, “You will not surely die, you will be like God” Genesis 3:4-5. The lie that you believe every time you exchange the glory of God for any lesser replacement is that you are God. Sin says serve you, honor you, worship you, you are the most important being in the universe.

3. SELF-WORSHIP INEVITABLY LEADS TO SELF-INDULGENCE. (vv.26-27)

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. Romans 1:26-27

John MacArthur says that Romans 1:24-32 is the most sobering and fearful passage in the entire epistle of Romans. Notice here that this is the second of two times in our text for this morning that Paul uses the phrase “God gave them up” and he will use it one more time in our text for next week. This Greek word *Paradidomi* is incredibly strong. In the New Testament this word is used of giving one’s body to be burned (1 Cor. 13:3) and three times of Christ’s giving Himself up to death (Gal. 2:20; Eph. 5:2, 25). It is used in a judicial sense of men being committed to prison (Mark 1:14; Acts 8:3) or to judgment (Matt. 5:25; 10:17, 19, 21; 18:34) and of the Father’s delivering His own Son to propitiatory death (Rom. 4:25; 8:32).³

Because of our hardness of heart, and because of our exchange of His glory for lesser replacements, God sometimes removes his restraining grace and allows a sinner to willfully plunge deeper and deeper into his or her sin. I heard a pastor say one time that the thing that you ought to fear most in life is God giving you what you want. And that is exactly what we see taking place here in verses 26-27. God loosing the reins, not in the sense of His sovereign control, is what we refer to as the doctrine of judicial abandonment. We need to know that this doesn’t mean that God removes all of His restraining common grace on man. Even in His judicial abandonment, God graciously keeps us from being as completely wicked as we could be. Jonathan Edwards summarizes this truth saying:

Sin is the ruin and misery of the soul; it is destructive in its nature; and if God should leave it without restraint, there would need nothing else to make the soul perfectly miserable. The corruption of the heart of man is a thing that is immoderate and boundless in its fury; and while wicked men live here, it is like fire pent up by God’s restraints, whereas if it were let loose, it would set on fire the [whole] course of nature; and as the heart is now a sink of sin, so, if sin was not restrained, it would immediately turn the soul into a fiery oven, or a furnace of fire and brimstone.⁴

Look what happens here in our text as a result of God letting man have the desires of his sinful heart. Paul says, “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.” Why does Paul hone in on homosexuality here? He does this because

³ John MacArthur, *Romans 1–8*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. 99.

⁴ John Murray, *Collected Writings: Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 99.

homosexuality it so unnatural that it demonstrates the utter extent of man's depravity. Other sins are just as evil, but they are naturally evil. We are not getting better; we are not ascending to greater heights of morality and spirituality. What you see here is the awful downward spiral that accompanies a rejection of God's truth. And in the end, man lowers himself to a condition below God's created purpose. His thinking has become futile; his heart has become darkened. In his inability to think straight, but claiming to be wise, he tries to justify and explain his sin in terms of biology and psychology. He says, "I'm not sinning, I don't choose to be this way." To which God says, "Yes, you did choose this...you chose to reject me. You replaced my glory, which I created you to worship and instead have worshipped and served yourself and indulged in the very shameless acts that invite my righteous anger." Martyn Lloyd Jones says:

The world as it is today is the greatest proof possible of the wrath of God against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men [who suppress] the truth in unrighteousness. Our world today with all of its baffling moral problems, with its incredible moral muddle, with all the loudness and the ugliness and the foulness on the increase, is just an absolute proof of what the Apostle says here. We have been taught that education and culture and moral lectures and moral societies are going to make man moral. But they are not doing it now and they cannot do it. So the modern world itself proves that the doctrine which it hates above every doctrine, the doctrine of the wrath of God, is actually a fact; and when the wrath of God manifests itself in this way, and when God withdraws His restraining grace and abandons man to himself, the result is what you see.⁵

Paul goes on to say they "receive in themselves the due penalty for their error." Make no mistake - sin has consequences. Sometimes these consequences are immediate and sometimes they are delayed, but God, who is holy, must deal with sin. MacArthur says, "Fallen men are not concerned about their sin but only about the pain from the unpleasant consequences sin brings. Someone has well said that sin would have fewer takers if the consequences were immediate." Remember Jeremiah 2:5 – when you pursue worthlessness, you become worthless. Two other texts in Jeremiah 2 are relevant to this issue as well:

For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water. Jeremiah 2:13

Your evil will correct you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the LORD your God; the fear of me is not in you, declares the Lord GOD of hosts. Jeremiah 2:19

⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Romans 1, The Gospel of God*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 392.

James Montgomery Boice says:

We think of God as a miser of happiness, keeping back from us all that would make us happy. We think that by running away from Him we will be happy, wild, and free. But it doesn't work that way. Instead of happiness we find misery. Instead of freedom we find the debilitating bondage of sin.⁶

Perverted sexual behavior is not a sickness, it is sin. And it is a sin from which one can recover! In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Paul says:

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

The glory of the gospel is that there is hope! God's judicial abandonment is not eternal abandonment. As long as sinful men are alive, there is opportunity for salvation. 2 Peter 3:9 says, "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance." Sin causes massive destruction and it demands a radical payment. I hope that you have trusted Christ's payment for your sin. I pray that you are "found in Him" Philippians 3:9.

Romans 1:21-27 shows us how unlovely we are. It shows us how much we have missed the mark, how short we fall. It reveals the depravity and evil that resides in each human heart. But these verses also reveal the beauty and power of the gospel. I encourage you this morning to anchor all of your hope in Christ, "with [Him] there is forgiveness" Psalm 130:4.

⁶ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans 1-4, Justification by Faith*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 178.