

## The Depravity of Man: From Suppression of Truth to Approval of Sin

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Romans 1:28-32

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Last week in our study of Romans 1:21-27 we learned that there are massive consequences when we reject the truth of God's Word and instead try and live by our own sinful wisdom. We saw that as a result of this foolishness, two separate times, once in verse 24 and once in verse 26, God has loosened the reigns of His common grace and allowed sinful man to spiral further and further downward in his sin. Before we move into our text for this morning, I want to pause and take a brief moment to share eight summary statements with you that I think will help you catalog the truths you have learned over the last few weeks:

1. God's justice is certain and inflexible towards those who suppress His truth. (v. 18)
2. No one will be able to use the excuse that God has not revealed Himself. (vv. 19-20)
3. We are all guilty of neglecting to give God the honor and thanks that He is due. (v. 21)
4. When we fail to worship God, we end up worshipping everything. (vv. 22-23)
5. Idolatry always leads to immorality. (v. 24)
6. We exchange the truth of God for the lie that we are sufficient to be our own god. (v. 25)
7. Self-worship inevitably leads to self-indulgence. (vv. 26-27)
8. Living outside of God's design (sin) has consequences. (v. 27)

This morning, as we look at the concluding verses in the first chapter of Romans, we again come face to face with the tragic results of our failure to acknowledge God. For the third time, we see God letting us have what we think we want in exchange for what we really need – namely, Himself. Let me warn you that our study this morning is ugly. I don't mean that God's Word is ugly, but rather what it exposes in our hearts is ugly. We don't like to be confronted with our sin; we are truth suppressors. Our natural propensity is to try and justify and rationalize our actions. We don't like to categorize our behavior in terms of its failure to glorify God. We would rather defend and excuse our sin in terms of our biology and physiology, but God's Word doesn't let us justify and excuse our sin. It confronts us like a mirror; it reflects back to us who we really are.

I am reminded of the little boy who was flying over gorgeous green pastures in New Zealand. As he looked out the window he said, "Daddy, daddy, daddy, those sheep are so white." Against the backdrop of the pasture they looked perfectly white. On the return flight, there had been a fresh powdering of snow. As the little boy looked out the window he said, "Daddy, daddy, daddy, those sheep are so yellow." What happened? Did the sheep change colors? No! The backdrop changed and the snow just revealed what the sheep really looked like. The writer of Hebrews illustrates the sin-confronting power of God's Word and how it exposes us for who we really are:

*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account. Hebrews 4:12–13*

Before we turn our attention to this morning's text, I want to encourage you to take just a moment, in the quietness of your soul, and ask God to use His Word to cut away those areas of our hearts that aren't pleasing to Him. Ask Him to expose and shine light on those areas that are in need of change and sanctification. Ask Him to give you the grace to lay down your natural propensity to defend, justify and excuse your sin, and instead to respond humbly in repentance, casting yourself upon His matchless grace.

*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. Romans 1:28–32*

### **1. THE RESULT OF REJECTING GOD IS A REJECTED MIND. (v. 28)**

*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. Romans 1:29*

It is interesting to note that there is an apparent play on words here in verse 29. Paul begins by reminding us that we have not seen fit to acknowledge God; instead, we have tried to replace God, rename sin, and suppress the very conviction of conscience that God gave us as a built in indicator of our accountability to Him. The phrase "seen fit" here has the idea of testing. In other words, we have tested God to see if we like Him, to see if He meets our standards, if He is a helper or a hindrance to me getting what I want. What Paul is saying here is that after we have tested God, we have made the foolish decision that we would rather go solo. We would rather live life without God, accountable to ourselves, and to our own destruction.

Here again we see those four chilling words "God gave them up". One of the things that we ought to fear most in life is God giving us what we want. When we decide that we want to try and do life apart from our Creator there is a sense in which He says, "Okay." This doesn't mean that He gives over control in terms of His sovereignty, but He does let go of some of His restraining grace, letting us swim in the consequences of our sin. A debased or depraved mind is like a demagnetized compass, it points you in a direction, but it has no reference of true North. In other words, it won't get you where you really want to go. Solomon tells us the same when he says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death [destruction]" Proverbs 16:25.

Since we have tested God and decided that it is more convenient not to acknowledge Him, Paul says that He gives us up to a debased [rejected] mind to do what ought not be done. Here is where the play on words comes in. The Greek word for debased is (ἀδόκιμος - adokimos) and it means to not stand the test, to be worthless. It was a word that was commonly used in metal refining trade. Metals, when they are mined from the earth contain all types of impurities that are not useful. Refiners would heat the metal until it began to separate from its impurities. The pure metal would be poured off, kept and used, while the impurities were then discarded (adokimos) as having no value. In relation to God, the rejecting mind becomes a rejected mind and thereby becomes spiritually depraved, worthless and useless.<sup>1</sup>

Paul shows us what this rejected mind looks like in 1 Corinthians 2:14 when he says, “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are *folly* to him, and he is *not able to understand* them because they are spiritually discerned.” We think that we have tested God and found Him to be unfit or worthless, but God says that in reality, in rejecting Him, He has given us over to a rejected, worthless mind to do those things which ought not be done. There is an Old Testament story that you probably know well that illustrates how a proud, rejecting mind becomes the rejected mind. Turn with me to Daniel 4:28-37.

*All this came upon King Nebuchadnezzar. At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and the king answered and said, “Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?” While the words were still in the king’s mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, “O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.” Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles’ feathers, and his nails were like birds’ claws. At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever, for his dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom endures from generation to generation; all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him, “What have you done?”*

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Romans 1–8*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1991), 108.

*At the same time my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my majesty and splendor returned to me. My counselors and my lords sought me, and I was established in my kingdom, and still more greatness was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble. Daniel 4:28–37*

## **2. EVERY HUMAN FACULTY HAS BEEN INFECTED WITH SIN. (vv. 29-31)**

*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. Romans 1:29-31*

Paul by no means intends for this to be a comprehensive list of sin, but rather a broad overview of the wickedness that resides in each of our hearts. What I have tried to do here is to break this list of 21 sins into five categories to show you the extent of our falseness. My point is not to try and draw perfect lines between these various sins; you will see as we move through them some could very well overlap categories. My desire, rather, is to show that our wickedness knows no boundaries when it is unrestrained, and that it has infected every area of our lives.

Let me caution you by saying that it is possible that you might not currently be struggling with every one of these sins, but be careful of the temptation to try and score yourself. We would be naïve to think that the seeds of each one of these sins are not in our hearts, and that given the right circumstance, and the wrong sinful perspective, would sprout. Sin has affected our character, conduct, conversation, concepts and companionships. Keep in mind that all of the sins that follow are a result of exchanging the truth of God for the lie and worshipping and serving ourselves rather than the Creator.

### **1. Fallen Character:**

A. Unrighteousness - This is the same word that Paul used in verse 18 for truth suppressors. He says that it is because of our unrighteousness that the wrath of God is being revealed. God is righteous and holy, apart from Christ we are not, and God must punish sin. I think what Paul is doing here is giving fuller expression to what unrighteousness looks like. Unrighteousness includes any disobedience to the revealed will of God.

\* Fornication - For those of you who use the KJV, you see the word fornication right after unrighteousness. There is a little textual variance in the way some Greek manuscripts read, hence, some translations include the word fornication and some do not. While this word does not appear in the most reliable manuscripts, it certainly is not outside of the context of the passage. In verse 24 Paul says God gave them over to the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. Sex outside of the confines of marriage is unrighteous and not a part of God's will for your life.

- B. Evil - This is the general term for wickedness in the heart of man. In Mark 7:21–23 Jesus, talking about the evil in man’s heart, said, “For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person.”
- C. Covetousness - Covetousness speaks of the heart that is never satisfied. It always longs for something else or something more; It is greedy. It is the opposite of contentment and is a direct attack on God’s ability to provide for His creation. One of the Puritans said, “A covetous man, though he have enough to sink him, [never has] enough to satisfy him.”
- D. Malice - Malice is secretly wishing evil or trouble on someone else. This is oftentimes the result of a wounded ego. You felt in some way injured by someone else, and now you wish they would pay.
- E. Envy - Envy is a spirit of dissatisfaction or opposition to the prosperity or happiness of other people. It is not being thankful for what God has given you and instead wanting some thing that God has given another. Donald Whitney in his book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* asks, “Can you serve your boss and others at work, helping them to succeed and be happy, even when they are promoted and you are overlooked? Can you work to make others look good without envy filling your heart? Can you minister to the needs of those whom God exalts and men honor when you yourself are neglected? Can you pray for the ministry of others to prosper when it would cast yours in the shadows?”<sup>2</sup>
- F. Deceitful - Deceit is that propensity in your heart to conceal the truth, to be dishonest for your own gain, often at the expense of someone else. Calvin says, “The human heart has so many crannies where vanity hides, so many holes where falsehood lurks, is so decked out with deceiving hypocrisy, that it often dupes itself.”
- G. Haters of God - John Gerstner said, “Man the sinner hates God, hates man, and hates himself. He would kill God if he could. He does kill his fellow man when he can. [And] he commits spiritual suicide every day of his life.”<sup>3</sup>
- H. Insolent - This is someone who is a violent aggressor, particularly with their words. They are always looking for an argument or a fight.
- I. Haughty - You compare yourself to everyone. You think that you always have to show or prove yourself to others. You make yourself feel better or more important by putting yourself above others.

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines of the Christian Life*. (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), 122.

<sup>3</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *Romans 1-4, Justification by Faith*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 186.

- J. Heartless - The Greek here has the idea of hard-heartedness toward your family. How many of us are carrying a grudge or some offense against a family member that we just can't lay down?
- K. Ruthless - This is the only time this word is used in the New Testament and it has the idea of refusing to show mercy. It is interesting that everyone wants mercy, but not everyone is merciful. Everyone wants the benefit of the doubt, but not everyone is eager to show others grace; this ruthless seed wants only law and no grace.

## 2. Fallen Conduct:

- A. Murder - This is the heart that despises others. It is uncontrolled anger in your heart towards another person. Remember Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment" Matthew 5:21-22.
- B. Disobedient to parents - This is just another expression of rebellion against God's created order of authority. We teach them how to be masterful lovers of self and then wonder why they balk at our authority.
- C. Faithless - The Greek for this word is covenant breaker. It has the idea of not being able to keep your word. You say one thing and do another without any regard for how it affects others.

## 3. Fallen Conversation:

- A. Strife - This describes quarrelsome people. You are always up for a good argument. You always have to have the last word, even when you know you are wrong.
- B. Gossips - The Greek word for gossip here is *whisperer*. It is the passing on of any information, that if heard might change someone's perception of the person you are speaking about. Gossip often veils itself in acceptable conventions such as "Have you heard..." or "Did you know...?" or "They tell me..." or "Keep this to yourself, but..." or "I do not believe it is true, but I heard that..." or "I wouldn't tell you, except that I know it will go no further." Of course, the most infamous such rationalization in Christian circles is, "I am telling you this so you can pray."<sup>4</sup> Blaise Pascal once said, "I lay it down as a fact of life that if all men knew what others say of them, there would not be four friends in the world."

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<sup>4</sup> Kent Hughes, *Disciplines of a Godly Man*. (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 139.

C. Slanderers - Not only will you talk about someone behind closed doors, but you will take shots at another person's character in public settings. This is often the result of having your feelings hurt. Since you feel hurt, you feel like you need to take matters into your own hands and make sure that justice is administered. When you elevate yourself, you cannot help but to devalue others. Inner disdain will eventually be expressed in outward slander. Jesus said that the tongue always follows the heart (Luke 6:45).

D. Boastful - The Greek here has the idea of being an empty pretender. Boastful people are oftentimes know-it-alls. They overstate their accomplishments and exaggerate their abilities, their talents, their reputations, and their value. They are always the heroes of their own stories.

#### 4. Fallen Concepts:

A. Foolish - This is the failure to use your mental capacity in the way that God intended. It also has the idea of falsely thinking that there is peace with God when it doesn't exist.

B. Inventors of evil - Unrighteous men will use time to do unrighteous things. You need not go any farther than Google to confirm this truth.

#### 5. Fallen Companionships:<sup>5</sup>

A. Not only do they do the same, but they give approval (applaud) those who practice them.

### 3. OUR SIN IS A RESULT OF AN IMPROPER FEAR OF GOD. (v. 32)

*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. Romans 1:32*

Verse 32 is literally the bottom of the barrel as far as the depth of sin is concerned. Paul has been recounting the downward spiral that takes place when we jettison the truth of God for our own foolish wisdom and here is the bottom. It is interesting to note that even with a darkened heart and a depraved mind, men still know that God disapproves of their behavior. They actually know more than that; they know that God's decree is that those who practice such things deserve death. This means that there is no such thing as an atheist. They don't exist. All men know that God exists and that they are accountable to Him, therefore, as one missionary said, "We are sinning against a flood of light." Donald Grey Barnhouse recounts a conversation that he once had with a young man who claimed to be an atheist:

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<sup>5</sup> John Phillips, *Exploring Romans*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981), 33.

*When he told me that he was an atheist I said to him, "It may be of no concern to you what my opinion of that statement is, but I would like to ask you a question. I know from the Word of God that a man who says there is no God is a fool, and in the Hebrew sense this means that he is insane. Now the question is this: Were you telling the truth when you said you did not believe that there is a God, for I want to know whether you are crazy or a liar. For there is no other alternative, Not only do all men know there is a god, but they know that He must hate and judge sin."<sup>6</sup>*

How is it that we can continue sinning when we blatantly know that the payment for sin is death? God wasn't joking in the garden when he promised death for sin. The only way I see that a man can continue on in sin with knowledge of its devastating consequences, is that he has no fear of God. In Psalm 36:1-2 David said, "Transgression speaks [whispers] to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found [detected] out and hated." God, in His graciousness, has given every person a conscience. That conscience is a built-in warning system that is intended to help us discern what is right from what is wrong. It can either be strengthened by continuously hiding God's Word in your heart and pursuing obedience, or it can be seared by continually rejecting God's Word and pursuing sin. When this conscience becomes desensitized, men become a loose cannon of sinful destruction.

This verse is a clear picture of what happens when a person can no longer discern what is right from what is wrong. He has become so desensitized to His sin that he doesn't even care if there are consequences. There is a growing appetite for sin in his heart and not only that, but he gets pleasure from the sin of others. This insatiable love of sin reminds me of how Eskimos trap and kill wolves. An Eskimo will coat his knife blade with animal blood and allows it to freeze. He then adds layer after layer of frozen blood until the blade is completely concealed. He then fixes his knife in the ground with the blade up. When a wolf follows his sensitive nose to the source of the scent and discovers the bait, he licks it, tasting the fresh frozen blood. He begins to lick faster, more and more vigorously, lapping the blade until the keen edge is bare. Feverishly now, harder and harder, the wolf licks the blade in the cold Arctic night. His craving for blood becomes so great that he does not notice the razor-sharp sting of the naked blade on his own tongue. Nor does he recognize the instant when his insatiable thirst is being satisfied by his own warm blood. His carnivorous appetite continues to crave more and more until the morning light reveals his destruction.

When God gives men over to a debased mind, there is no limit to his sin. He not only commits sin with blatant disregard for the just wrath of God, but he approves the sin of others. At this point there is no hope for a man like this, save God step in and give him a new heart because there is nothing left to appeal to. We must be careful what we approve of. We must be careful what we applaud. When we approve of the sin of others, we are not too far from it ourselves.

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<sup>6</sup> Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Romans vol. 1: Man's Ruin*. (Grandrapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1952), 294.

#### 4. OUR CASE IS HOPELESS APART FROM THE SOVEREIGN GRACE OF GOD.

The doctrine of total depravity means not that that we are as wicked as we could be, but that we are completely incapable of changing our own hearts. Apart from Christ there is nothing good in us, nothing that pleases God, nothing that merits salvation. Jeremiah tells us, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick” Jeremiah 17:9. Romans 1, in its entirety, serves to show how really unlovable we are. There is nothing beautiful about us, nothing worthy of saving. This reality is what makes the gospel so beautiful. Because when God saves wicked, depraved sinners, it makes much of His grace. The reality is that the story gets worse before it gets better. Paul’s indictment against sinful men spans the first three chapters of Romans. But just when all hope seems to be lost, Romans 3:21-26 bursts forth in glorious light.

*But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3:21–26*

I would like to close this morning by sharing a prayer written in *The Valley of Vision* that aptly captures the contrite heart that coming face to face with God’s Word should produce in us:

Eternal Father, You are good beyond all thought, But I am vile, wretched, miserable, blind; My lips are ready to confess, but my heart is slow to feel, and my ways reluctant to amend. I bring my soul to you; break it, wound it, bend it, mould it. Unmask to me sin’s deformity, that I may hate it, abhor it, flee from it. My faculties have been a weapon of revolt against you; as a rebel I have misused my strength, and served the foul adversary of your kingdom. Give me grace to bewail my insensate folly, grant me to know that the way of transgressors is hard, that evil paths are wretched paths, that to depart from thee is to lose all good. I have seen the purity and beauty of your perfect law, the happiness of those in whose heart it reigns, the calm dignity of the walk to which it calls, yet I daily violate and condemn its precepts. Your loving Spirit strives within me, brings me Scripture warnings, speaks in startling providences, allures by secret whispers, yet I choose devices and desires to my own hurt, impiously resent, grieve, and provoke him to abandon me. All these sins I mourn, lament, and for them cry pardon. Work in me more profound and abiding repentance; give me the fullness of a godly grief that trembles and fears, yet ever trusts and loves, which is ever powerful, and ever confident. Grant that through the tears of repentance, I may see more clearly the brightness and glories of the saving cross.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers & Devotions.* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975), 124-125.