

Romans: The Good News of God

Abandoned by God

Romans 1:24-32

Rev. Freddy Fritz

April 22, 2007

Abandoned by God

Scripture

Let's read Romans 1:24-32:

²⁴ Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. ²⁵ They exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen.

²⁶ Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones. ²⁷ In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

²⁸ Furthermore, since they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, he gave them over to a depraved mind, to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; ³¹ they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them. (Romans 1:24-32)

Introduction

Preaching to his congregation on Romans 1:18-32, Pastor Walter Luthi said, "In the words that we have just read we are told the whole truth about our condition. There may well be people among us who cannot bear to hear the truth, and would like to creep quietly away out of this church. Let them do so if they

wish.”¹

There is justification for Luthi’s words, for Paul’s canvas upon which he has painted his picture—dark, foreboding, threatening, flashing with lightening and crashing with thunder—is crammed with forms and figures, lights and shadows, of sin, wrath, and judgment.

And the revelation of God’s wrath is total and complete, encompassing all and rendering all without excuse and under condemnation, both individually and collectively.

The prophet Isaiah spoke of judgment as God’s “strange work” (cf. Isaiah 28:21).² The idea that it is a strange work is because of a popular contemporary misunderstanding of the being and attributes of God in Scripture. People in our society tend to think of God only as a God of love. God certainly is a God of love, but he has many more attributes, not least of which is justice.

The justice of God is sometimes divided into several categories. One category is the *retributive justice* of God, which is an expression of divine wrath in which God punishes the wicked (Genesis 2:17; Deuteronomy 27:26; Galatians 3:10; Romans 6:23). Since God is just and righteous, the punishment of sinners is fair because they receive the just penalty due them for their sin.³

Three times Paul says that God **gave** (*paredoken*) **them over** in verses 24, 26, and 28.

The primary purpose of this sermon is to analyze and, if possible, clarify the meaning of the term *paredoken*, setting it within the context of the theology of the being and attributes of God, particularly his *retributive justice*.

The apostle Paul introduced his message of the gospel to the Romans in the opening section (1:1-17).

His theme is that the gospel is the righteousness of God that is received by faith alone (1:16-17).

¹ Walter Luthi, *The Letter to the Romans: An Exposition* translated by Kurt Shoenenberger (Richmond, VA, 1961), 19.

² The Hebrew word translated as “strange” does not mean strange in the sense of contrary to God’s goodness and grace, but simply *unusual* and *extraordinary*.

³ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1997, c1989), 196.

Next, he began his development of the case history of human sin and condemnation (1:18-23). The section begins in 1:18 and does not conclude until 3:20. In it Paul moves from the declaration of Gentile sin (1:18-32) through Jewish sin (2:1-3:8) to the climax of the apostolic diagnosis that “the whole world” is guilty, with every mouth stopped, speechless in the terror of condemnation before a holy and righteous God (3:19-20).

In the immediate context, Paul, in his endeavor to prove that the only righteousness available to man is that which is obtained by faith alone, declared that God’s displeasure toward sin has been revealed from heaven (1:18).

It follows, then, that all that are charged with godlessness or wickedness stand under his wrath and cannot obtain acceptance before God by their character or conduct.

That people are guilty and, therefore, inexcusable is evident, because they have enjoyed a revelation of God’s eternal power and divine nature and yet have rejected it (1:19-20).

Not only have they rejected this truth, they have given themselves up to idolatry (1:21-23).

The Pauline picture of the religious history of mankind is one of regression, not progression, of devolution, not evolution, downgrade, not upgrade. In unbelief man has passed from light to futility to folly. Thus, the divine wrath has found its justification in human rejection of “the truth of God” (1:18, 25).

Put simply, man’s problem is sin, the little three-letter word that has been banned from our conversations. Man loves to trace his predicament to every other conceivable alternative but the one that satisfies the situation.

Our difficulties are traced to “the frontier spirit” by which our country was settled, characterized as they were by violence.

Others trace our difficulties to the “permissiveness” of the day, the movie industry, or to the media and its choice of the news it disseminates. And when sin is committed, our society has a hard time calling the perpetrator a *sinner*.

We saw that this past week with the horrific murders on the

Virginia Tech campus. Dr. Del Tacket of The Truth Project noted that he “listened to a number of broadcasts and read a number of articles and almost all of them are in the mode of finding blame outside of the one who pulled the trigger.”⁴

But the plain, simple, unadulterated truth is that the wickedness perpetrated in this world is due to sin. And it is committed by a sinner.

Lesson

Divine retribution is a fact that we must face, and Paul introduces his readers to the teaching in the section that concludes chapter one of his greatest work. We turn to it now, asking that God give us insight and courage to face our human dilemma.

I. Given Over to Sinful Desires (1:24-25)

First, we are given over to sinful desires.

Romans 1:18 is the title verse of the charge that people are all under sin: “The wrath of God is being *revealed* from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.”

They are accused of godlessness and wickedness. *Godlessness* is a religious word, and it is best seen in the idolatry of Romans 1:21-23. *Wickedness* is a moral term, and is best seen in the immorality pictured in Romans 1:24-32, the section to which we are turning.

The word **therefore** (*dio*) in Romans 1:24 makes the connection with the preceding. In the light of the rebellion just described in Romans 1:18-23 the inference of judgment is drawn. Sin justly brings judgment, a judgment expressed most clearly in Romans 1:24-32.

⁴ Del Tacket in <http://www.thetruthproject.org>, in an email newsletter dated 4/18/2007.

In verses 24-25 the apostle Paul states that since men did not worship God as God, exchanging the truth of God for a lie, and worshiping and serving the creation rather than the Creator, God gave them over to sinful desires for the degrading of their bodies with one another.

And that brings us to the heart of the passage and the judgment of God expressed in the threefold occurrence of the word *paredoken*, which means, “**gave them over.**” The repetition is like a terrible refrain.⁵ Over its meaning there has raged considerable debate, and we now turn to a consideration of the three major viewpoints in the interpretation of God’s giving over of men.

First, perhaps the favorite interpretation of the term is that which has prevailed since the time of Origen and Chrysostom, in which the term is taken in a *permissive sense*. According to this view God permitted men to fall into the retributive consequences of their infidelity and apostasy. However, the active voice of the verb is surely contrary to this view. It is not said that God *permitted* rebellious men to fall in the sinful desires to sexual impurity. No. God actively, although justly in view of their sin, consigned them to the consequences of their acts. It is his divine judgment that sin be punished by further sin.

Second, another popular view, which became current after the time of Augustine, takes the term in a *private sense*. According to this interpretation God deprived man of an aspect of his work of common grace. He withdrew his hand that had restrained men from evil. Godet has expressed and illustrated this interpretation about as well as it can be set forth. “Wherein did God’s action consist?” he asks. And the answer follows, “He positively withdrew his hand; he ceased to hold the boat as it was dragged by the current of the river.”⁶

But this view is the practical equivalent of the permissive

⁵ Cf. M.-J. LaGrange, *Saint Paul Epître aux Romains* (4th ed.; Paris, 1930), 28. He remarks that the term’s threefold occurrence is not climactic, but is a kind of refrain.

⁶ F. Godet, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, translated by A. Cusin (Edinburgh, 1881), I, 177-178.

view. Paul's language is stronger than this. The expression, "**God gave them over . . .**", describes a judicial act,⁷ a "judicial abandonment."⁸ The active force of the verb must not be minimized.

Third, therefore, this term must be given *a judicial sense*. The meaning is not simply that God withdrew from the wicked the restraining force of his providence and common grace, but that he positively gave men over to judgment. This judgment consists of "a more intensified and aggravated cultivation of the lusts of their own hearts with the result that they reap for themselves a correspondingly greater toll of retributive vengeance."⁹ The usage of the word in both this letter (cf. 4:25; 6:17) and in other Pauline letters (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:5; 1 Timothy 1:20) supports this use.

There is another striking occurrence of the identical form the verb *paredoken* in Ephesians 4:19. That passage serves to remind us that the infliction of punitive justice does not compromise the free agency and responsibility of man. In that passage Paul, speaking of the Gentiles writes, "Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over (*paredoken*) to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more." In the midst of the retributive action of God there is no coercion of man. God does not entice or compel to evil. Man remains responsible and can be said to be giving himself over to sinful desires while God gives him up to the judgment of his sin.

There is a popular saying to the effect that God made man in his own image, but now man is returning the compliment by making his gods in his own image. That saying receives some support from Paul's words here, and one can see that the consequences of that action are deadly.

II. Given Over to Shameful Lusts (1:26-27)

Second, we are given over to shameful lusts.

⁷ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1960), I, 44.

⁸ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Philadelphia, PA, 1886), 40.

⁹ Murray, I, 44-45.

In Romans 1:26-27 **God gave them over to shameful lusts**, which Paul specifies as lesbian practices (1:26) and male homosexual relationships (1:27).

These two verses are crucial verses in the contemporary debate about homosexuality. The traditional interpretation, that these verses describe and condemn *all* homosexual behavior, is being vigorously challenged at every level by the gay lobby today. They are advancing three arguments.

First, it is claimed that this passage is irrelevant. The ground for this assertion is that the purpose of this passage is neither to teach sexual ethics, nor to expose vice, but rather to portray the outworking of God's wrath. Now, this is true. But if a certain sexual conduct is to be seen as the consequence of God's wrath, that conduct must be displeasing to him.

Second, it is claimed that Paul is thinking only about adult male homosexual relationships with boys since there was no other form of male homosexuality in the Greco-Roman world, and that he is opposing it because of the humiliation and exploitation experience by the youths involved.¹⁰ Our response to this claim is simply that the text itself contains absolutely no hint of it. It is a claim concocted out of thin air to justify homosexual behavior.

And third, there is the question of what Paul meant by **natural**. Some homosexual activists urge that their relationships cannot be described as **unnatural**, since their homosexual actions are perfectly natural to them. John Boswell has written, for example, that "the persons Paul condemns are manifestly not homosexual: what he derogates are homosexual acts committed by apparently heterosexual people." Hence Paul's statement that they **exchanged natural relations for unnatural ones** (1:26; cf. also 1:27).¹¹

Richard Hays has written a thorough exegetical rebuttal of this interpretation of Romans 1:26-27, however. He provides ample evidence that the opposition of **natural** and **unnatural** was

¹⁰ Robin Scroggs, *The New Testament and Homosexuality* (Fortress Press, 1983), 115ff., 130f.

¹¹ John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance and Homosexuality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 107ff.

“very frequently used . . . as a way of distinguishing between heterosexual and homosexual behavior.”¹²

Besides, differentiating between sexual orientation and sexual practice is a modern concept; “to suggest that Paul intends to condemn homosexual acts only when they are committed by persons who are constitutionally heterosexual is to introduce a distinction entirely foreign to Paul’s thought-world.”¹³

So then, we have no liberty to interpret the adjective “natural” as meaning “what seems natural to me.” On the contrary, the word **natural** has to do with God’s created order. To act contrary to the natural order means to violate the order that God has established, whereas to act according to the natural order means to behave in accordance with the intentions of the Creator.

Moreover, the intention of the Creator means his original intention. What this was Genesis tells us and Jesus confirmed: “At the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’” (Matthew 19:4-5). Then Jesus added his personal endorsement and deduction: “Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate” (v. 6).

As someone once said, “God created Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve”! God created mankind male and female. God instituted marriage as a heterosexual union. And what God has thus united, we have absolutely no liberty to separate. This threefold action of God established that the only context which he intends for the “one flesh” experience is heterosexual monogamy, and that a homosexual relationship (however loving and committed it may claim to be) is contrary to nature and must never be regarded as a legitimate alternative to marriage.

It should not be forgotten that the **shameful lusts** set forth here are the results of God’s judgments upon sinful men and

¹² Richard B. Hays, “Relations Natural and Unnatural: A Response to John Boswell’s Exegesis of Romans 1,” *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Spring 1986, 192.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 200f.

women. In our day, movies, plays, nightclubs, and sometimes churches glorify homosexuality. It is simply further evidence of the judgment of God upon our society. We should see the rise of homosexual behavior as evidence that God has given over sinful men and women to their sin.

III. Given Over to a Depraved Mind (1:28-32)

And third, we are given over to a depraved mind.

Romans 1:28-32 gives us a list of twenty-one sins. These sins should simply be seen as a partial, not exhaustive, list of what happens when a society rejects its Creator.

It concludes with one of the most damning texts in the Bible, **“Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them”** (1:32).

There are absolute standards that come down to us from heaven, and one of them is the wrath of God upon human sin.

Conclusion

There is hardly any passage in the Bible that says plainer than this one that moral depravity is the result of the judgment of God.

What, then, are the sources of the problems of the present age? As I. E. Howard indicates, “Spengler had a biological answer: civilizations grow old and die like any other living thing. Toynbee has a religious answer: civilizations fail to respond to the higher challenges of the Spirit and therefore fossilize. In his *Civilization and Ethics* Albert Schweitzer tried to find an ethical answer. St. Paul had still a different answer.”¹⁴

Paul’s answer is plain, and Romans 1:24 expresses it most impressively and succinctly. When man rebelled and sinned, God

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

“gave them over” in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. In other words, sexual rebellion, license, and anarchy are the judgment of God.

It should be carefully noted that the apostle Paul is not speaking of eternal punishment in these verses (vv. 24, 26, 28). He writes of a judgment that pertains to this life.

On the other hand, it is also plain that Paul’s words lead on to the doctrine of everlasting torment (cf. 1:32). The judgment inflicted by God is continued in the life to come in a more terrible and permanent form if the escape through the gospel of the cross is neglected.

To the question sometimes posed by softhearted people, “Can God really give man up to judgment?” this passage provides a resounding “yes” answer.

But, in fact, it is not the final and convicting answer to the question. That comes from the cross of Jesus Christ, which in the cry it elicits from our Lord, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” unmistakably affirms the fact that God can give man up to judgment. It was there that the sinless Man bore the judgment of God upon sin, and it forever proclaims the true nature of sin—it is worthy of the penalty of spiritual and physical death—and God’s hatred of it with his necessary condemnation of it.

Does God then care? The answer to this question also comes from the cross. It was God who gave the Son to offer the penal, atoning, substitutionary sacrifice, the remedy for sin and death. And, if that is not sufficient evidence of God’s love and concern, reflect further upon the fact that it is also he who has revealed to men their lost condition and the significance of the atoning death, inscribed its interpretation in the written Word of God and preserved that Word for countless millions to read and ponder. Isaiah was right. Although righteous and necessary, judgment is his “strange work.” Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
2. www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181
3. www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz

Please give your input and leave your feedback at websites 2 and 3 when requested to do so. This helps with evaluation and planning of sermons.

Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church (PCA)

Answers for Life!

Address: 19911 Bruce B. Downs Blvd., Tampa, FL 33647

Telephone: (813) 973-2484

Fax: (813) 973-4673

Email: Office@TampaBayPresbyterian.org

Web site: www.TampaBayPresbyterian.org

PRAAYER:

Our Father, this passage of your Word shows what happens when you give people over to their sin. We know that sin breeds sin. And more sin breeds more sin.

Eventually, as an act of judgment, you give people over to their sinful desires, to their shameful lusts, and to depraved minds.

O Father, forgive us for our sin. Deliver us from evil and from the Evil One.

Enable us to believe that you have provided a way of escape from eternal condemnation through your Son, Jesus Christ.

Grant us the gift of faith and repentance so that we may be reconciled to you, now and for all eternity.

And all of this we pray in your wonderful name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.