

When people exchange the knowledge of God to make idols of human beings and other things, God reveals his wrath by turning them over to sin’s dehumanizing consequences which leave nothing uncorrupted: bodies, minds, and society. Return to your Creator who made you in his image and likeness.

Introduction – In this passage, which is the classic NT text explaining God’s wrath on a world that rejects him, we’ll explore another foundational issue: how the gospel speaks to us as human beings searching for who we really are. [[Calvin quote, ICR](#)]

I. The Tragic Exchange

A. Natural revelation suppressed (vv. 18-20)

1. We can deduce and infer from creation that the Creator is powerful, and this power must extend forever (eternal). Moreover, we can infer that the Creator is outside of the creation—thus he is supernatural, divine in nature. His eternal power and divine nature are invisible but not hidden attributes (cf. John 1:18; Colossians 1:15; 1 Timothy 1:17; Hebrews 11:27). The human heart tells us even more. The existence of universally recognized moral laws require a Moral Law Giver. Thus we can read truths about God from what is written on our hearts: that God is love, that he is personal and relational, that he is holy, just, wise, good, kind, and true. He hates evil yet he is patient, gracious, and merciful toward his creatures before he punishes.

2. But tragically, we ignore this knowledge. Natural revelation is clear to all, and that is why no one can claim an excuse. But people reject, suppress, and deny natural revelation. Why do we do it? The reason has always been the same: we go searching for a more fitting identity (Genesis 3:5; “you will be like God, knowing good and evil”). And so we trade in what we truly know about God and ourselves for the hope of something better.

B. The glory of God for creaturely images (vv. 21-23)

Once we suppress God’s natural revelation, the next logical step is to break the very first and second commandments ([WSC 47, 51](#)). When we *actively* suppress God’s truth, we *passively* become futile in our thinking, darkened in our hearts, and absurd in our worship. A person first reveals himself as a fool in what he worships—we could say in what he seeks his core identity or what he idolizes. Here the Bible demonstrates great insight into the human heart (Psalms 115:2-8; 135:15-18; Isaiah 44:12-28). By trading in God’s glory to worship a created thing, we inadvertently become like that thing, it becomes our identity. How tragic that human beings, made only a little lower than the angels (Psalms 8:5), made in the image and likeness of their Creator, would sell that birthright to worship birds, beasts, and bugs!

II. The Terrible Effects

A. Dishonored bodies (vv. 24-27)

1. Remember homosexuality is not the subject of this passage, and it is not the subject of this sermon either. It is only one point along the line of Paul’s logically arranged argument. When discussing sexual impurity, here the Bible uses the example of homosexual practice because it so obviously violates God’s natural created order. When people rebel against the image and likeness of God, and seek instead to root their identity in sexual desires, they will inevitably go as far as undermining the natural sexual relationship between God’s image bearers: male and female (Genesis 1:27; 2:23-25).

2. Here is the point: homosexual practice potently illustrates a general principle: all forms of sexual impurity dishonor our bodies and violate God's fundamental design for sex: procreation within the covenant of marriage. Though natural revelation is sufficient to teach us that sexual (particularly homosexual) impurity dishonors our bodies, God also gave us special revelation in his written Word about homosexual practice (Genesis 19:1-28; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Deuteronomy 23:17-18; 1 Corinthians 6:9; 1 Timothy 1:10).

B. Debased minds (vv. 28-31)

When we choose not to acknowledge God, he gives us over to a debased mind. A person with a debased mind will less and less reflect the image of God, and more and more the image and likeness of his chosen idol. And he'll adopt the terrible effects of his debased mind into his essential identity as not only character traits but justifiable attitudes and actions. A close examination of this vice list (along with the sins in the rest of Romans 1:18-32) shows they break every one of the Ten Commandments. Everyone can readily find themselves here.

C. Decadent societies (v. 32)

When moral standards rooted in natural revelation disappear, society will soon disintegrate. Every person by design has an internal moral sense that testifies to their conscience that certain acts deserve God's moral judgment and his wrath leading ultimately to death. Here is the crowning tragedy this passage concludes with: even though people know what is wrong in the sight of God, they still do what they know to be wrong and also approve of those who do the same!

III. The Teleological Answer

A. Recover the truth you instinctively know about God and yourself (vv. 18-21)

Although we were created in the image and likeness of God, through our own idolatry we have exchanged God's image and likeness for new identities. Rather than imaging God's truth, beauty, and goodness, idolatry ends up recreating you in a counterfeit image: in lies, ugliness, and moral wretchedness. Do you see how when you recover the truth about God and yourself, only then does the beauty and goodness that you long for become a part of who you were designed to be?

B. Repent of your foolish identity exchange and every sin that follows (vv. 22-32)

You will never be wiser than God. Every time you trade in your made-in-God's-image identity you lose. With a megaphone as big as the world God announces the miserable effects of sin you feel are a sign that his wrath is on you. The only way to escape God's wrath is to repent, to turn away from those beliefs and actions that you hoped would secure a better identity, and turn to God.

C. Return to your glorious Savior who made you in his image and likeness (vv. 16-17, 23)

Verse 23 reminds you that your self-identity should be a reflection of God's righteousness. The righteousness of God is not learned through natural revelation. The teleological answer points back to God's design for you in creation revealed in natural revelation. But there is no path back to the Garden of Eden. To get to the Promised Land you have to return to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. By God's design his righteous image-bearers shall live by faith.

Conclusion – God does indeed “give us over” to our sin when we try to build our self-identities apart from him. But wrath and “giving us over” are not the essence of God's identity. God reveals the essence of his self-giving love for all those made in his image and likeness (John 3:16-21). This is the gospel of Jesus Christ, which reveals the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.