

Sermons through

Romans

A Foolish Exchange

Romans 1:21-23

With Study Questions

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Romans 1:21-23

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, ¹⁹ because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. ²⁰ For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, ²¹ because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Professing to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things ²⁴ Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, ²⁵ who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen (Romans 1:18-25).

Introduction

It has been said that when Harriet Beecher Stowe (the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*) visited the White House, President Lincoln greeted her with the words, "the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war." Whether or not Lincoln actually said that is uncertain. But what is implied in that statement is that Stowe wrote a novel that forced the issue. The nation, especially its leaders, had to deal with the issue of slavery. There was power and prestige in the writing of a novel.

I was reminded of this legendary statement while visiting a friend who directs movies commenting on the increased number of independent films. He made the statement that in the 19th century, people sought to leave their mark by writing the great American novel; now people are seeking to leave their mark by producing the great American movie.

In modern films we see history revised, people groups vilified or exonerated, value systems extolled or demeaned; and all of this done with lighting, music, camera angles and skillful (yet not necessarily profound) dialogue. All this to say that the method by which a society draws ethical,

political, sociological, economic, familial, etc. conclusions becomes much more image based as they live out their rejection of the true and living God.¹

I must say that this comes to mind when I see posters with artistic images of political candidates (similar to an Andy Warhol painting) where hope lies not in the propositions of the candidate but in the person of the candidate. When “that is the proper way in which a people are to be governed” is replaced by “that person is going to make sure we’re taken care of.” When we, as a people, or I, as a person begin to move in that direction, whether intentionally or unwittingly, it reveals that I have made an exchange – a very foolish exchange.

Review

In review, the Apostle Paul is explaining why he is “eager” to “preach the gospel” (Romans 1:15); the gospel is the “power of God to salvation for everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). In the gospel sinners receive the “righteousness” which comes from God and this righteousness is apprehended through the instrument of “faith” (Romans 1:17), Christ being the object of that faith.

In Romans 1:18 Paul launches into a great indictment against humanity – that the “wrath of God is revealed” in the world in which we live – it is a present reality which can be observed in the darkness of human conduct. The great root of this problem is not that men do not have the truth, but that they “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.”

Paul then begins to explain what all men can’t not know – there is a universal epiphany given to all and manifest in all; this universal epiphany is the *gnoston tou theou* ‘the knowledge of God or the knowledge that there is a God.’ This knowledge is so certain that it leaves all people “without excuse” (Romans 1:20). Again, let us be reminded that this is why Paul is eager to preach the gospel, the gospel being man’s only hope.

In the verses before us Paul will further explain what the rejection of truth looks like and where it inevitably leads.

¹ None of this is to say that novels cannot proceed from idolatry or give evidence of the suppression of truth. Nor is it to say that the suppression of truth cannot produce sophisticated arguments—arguments that might sway and win the souls of our youth. But, as we shall see in verse 22, those who profess wisdom, have, as their root, an undue worship or reverence for that which is created rather than the Creator.

...because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:21).

Glorification and Thankfulness

We spoke of this in detail earlier so I won't repeat what Paul assumes in the beginning of this verse, that all men know God. This is not a saving knowledge of God, but still a sure knowledge which had been revealed to them. In reference to man's knowledge of God, Hodge explains that it...

...does not mean merely that they had the opportunity of knowing him, but that in the constitution of their own nature, and in the works of creation, they actually possessed an intelligible revelation of the Divine existence and perfections.²

Now the appropriate response to God's revelation of Himself would have been worship and thanksgiving. Responding to God in worship is the inevitable, reasonable and rational act of those who remotely perceive what God is. A Spirit, in and of Himself:

...infinite in being, (Exod. 3:14, Job 11:7-9) glory, (Acts 7:2) blessedness, (1 Tim. 6:15) and perfection; (Matt. 5:48) all-sufficient, (Gen. 17:1) eternal, (Ps. 90:2) unchangeable, (Mal. 3:6, James 1:17) incomprehensible, (1 Kings 8:27) every where present, (Ps. 139:1-13) almighty, (Rev. 4:8) knowing all things, (Heb. 4:13, Ps. 147:5) most wise, (Rom. 16:27) most holy, (Isa. 6:3, Rev. 15:4) most just, (Deut. 32:4) most merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth. (Exod. 34:6)³

We, often without reservation, recognize the attributes of God as virtues to be extolled – love, honor, justice, wisdom, etc. – how much more

² Hodge, Charles. Commentary of the Epistle to the Romans. P.38

³ *The Westminster larger catechism : With scripture proofs.* 1996. Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

is the source of all virtues to ascend to the pinnacle of our thoughts and hearts.

When eyes are fully opened, thankfulness would also appear on the list of man's reasonable response to God. For we owe God, not merely all that we have but our very existence. Add to that God's willingness to reveal Himself to us and in us. Calvin remarks:

Nor is it without reason that he adds, *that they were not thankful*, for there is no one who is not indebted to him for numberless benefits: yea, even on this account alone, because he has been pleased to reveal himself to us, he has abundantly made us indebted to him.⁴

So the proper and reasonable response to the knowledge of God would be to glorify Him as God and be thankful. But in the Apostle Paul's treatise of biblical anthropology (a biblical understanding of man) we see where the natural man inevitable goes.

The Inevitable Destination.

When the truth is rejected (the truth being most properly summed up in Christ Himself – John 14:6), there is an inevitable destination: ...**but (they) became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened (Romans 1:21b)**. Apart from the light of Christ, all human thought is ultimately futile and all human hearts are foolish and darkened.

Futility of thought means man's ability to thoroughly or thoughtfully reason clearly is reduced to nonsense. This does not mean that people aren't smart, nor does it mean that the natural man does not have the capacity to figure things out in their own limited capacity. One who rejects Christ may discover a cure for cancer or navigate a spaceship to Jupiter, whereas some Christians can't figure out how to put on a band-aid or find Europe on a map.

I believe Paul's point is that the natural man who rejects the existence of God cannot give a rational explanation for the very virtues they often

⁴ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:21). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

claim to undergird their progress. Why is it good for people to live rather than die? Why is truth preferable to lies? Why is work preferable to lethargy? Why is progress preferable to stagnation? In short, what is the meaning of life? Why do we exist? What is our purpose?

It is in the context of these types of questions that the able scientist is reduced to a mediocre philosopher. It is here that mankind becomes embarrassingly inept at giving any plausible explanation for anything at all. Calvin says it this way:

And thus their foolish mind, being involved in darkness, could understand nothing aright but was carried away headlong, in various ways, into errors and delusions. Their unrighteousness was this – they quickly choked by their own depravity the seed of right knowledge, before it grew up to ripeness.⁵

Or to explain it in the words of Jesus:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock (Matthew 7:24, 25).

At least in this illustration, there may not be anything wrong with the house; it may be very well built. But if the foundation is not solid, the house will inevitably experience a great fall (Matthew 7:27).

Natural man, at his best, is subject to a foolish darkened heart and futility of thought. We need help. Help is found in the gospel. It is no wonder Paul was eager to preach it. But it is not as if the natural man is keenly aware of his need for this help. As we suppress the truth of God being God – as we seek to demote God – we correspondingly promote ourselves. Paul continues:

⁵ Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: Romans* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries (Ro 1:21). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Professing to be wise, they became fools (Romans 1:22).

An Incredulous Profession

One of the great tragedies of the human existence is man's quest for wisdom apart from a God "**who alone is wise**" (Jude 25). It has been the source of untold hardship and oppression. And it was center-stage in the temptation which lead to death.

So when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make *one* wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate (Genesis 3:6).

Eve ate and Adam ate and they did not receive the promised wisdom; but that reality has been apparently insufficient in halting man's profession of wisdom. Like the Scarecrow's response to Dorothy when she asked how he can talk if he hasn't got a brain. "I don't know" he answered, "But some people without brains do an awful lot of talking, don't they?"

The word "professing" means to speak about something with certainty. And what they are asserting with certainty is that they are "wise." I appreciate A. W. Tozer's definition of wisdom: "Wisdom is to devise perfect ends by perfect means." In other words, wisdom knows exactly where it is to go and precisely the means to get there.

We live in a world of men in smocks, boldly professing wisdom (one can hardly help think of the university setting) to, perhaps unprepared young, malleable minds. A person who can manage to speak with authority needn't worry as much about content, unless the people to whom they speak have a healthy appreciation of the wisdom of God; or as Paul wrote elsewhere:

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. ¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," ²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile (1 Corinthians 3:18-20).

Williams G. T. Shedd gives his opinion of Paul's words:

The writer has in mind the great and perverse ingenuity with which the human intellect is employed, in inventing various schemes of pagan idolatry...Here, the darkening of the intellect is represented as the effect of the foolish and wicked speculation; the liar comes to believe his own lie.⁶

Paul sums up this foolish exchange with these words:

and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things (Romans 1:23).

An Image Made Like Man

The idolatry in this verse may have been a combination of what had happened with the Israelites in the wilderness (Psalm 106:20; Jeremiah 2:11) and what was taking place in the current pantheon of the Roman Empire and widespread idolatry (especially Greece, Acts 17:22).

The exchange of which Paul writes didn't mean that they changed one thing into another but exchanged one thing for another. And interestingly enough the exchange is not God for man but for an image like corruptible man. I have always found it a bit unnerving when the leaders of countries place human photos of themselves in conspicuous place for public consumption (for me I noticed this first with the Ayatollah Khomeini during the hostage crisis of 1979-80).

But the image of a man will always yield superior thoughts of that man than genuine interaction with the man himself. We think of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln and the great images of these men in Washington D.C. They achieve almost god-like status in our imaginations. How disappointed we would likely be if we actually spent a week vacationing with any of these men.

Modern man comforts himself in his own superiority over those agent idolaters who created images of birds, animals and snakes. We

⁶ A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans. Williams G.T. Shedd. P. 23.

would never idolize these mere beasts. But here is the irony: in the evolutionary scheme which is embraced by the modern enlightened intellect, man is merely (perhaps) the highest animal. Then we put a photo of the highest animal on a poster surrounded by words of hope. If that does not yield some form of idolatry I am not sure what would.

Corruptible and Incorruptible

Paul explains that it is woven into the nature of sinful man to exchange the incorruptible for the corruptible. We put our hopes in a corruptible creation (whether images of men or beasts and the philosophies they promote). The word “corruptible” pertains to that which is “bound to disintegrate and die.”⁷

“Incorruptible” on the other hand – the adjective he uses to describe the true God – describes a God who is not “subject to decay and death...a God who is imperishable and immortal.”⁸ This is the foolish exchange that man has made.

In my many years as a Christian in a very innovative religious culture (and I don't say that, necessary with admiration) I have heard and used many mottos and clichés, I have issued many retractions. But one I heard many years ago still stands.

He is no fool who exchanges what he cannot keep in order to gain that which he cannot lose.

Paul was eager to preach the gospel that men's eyes might be open to this truth. Man had exchanged his knowledge of, and glory in, the Creator for the creation. But in the gospel there is another exchange that is made. The glorious exchange of our sin imputed (transferred) to Christ and His righteousness imputed to those who believe. Let us turn our thoughts toward that as we approach the Lord's Table.

⁷ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (266). New York: United Bible Societies.

⁸ Louw, J. P., & Nida, E. A. (1996). *Vol. 1: Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament: Based on semantic domains* (electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) (267). New York: United Bible Societies.

Questions for Study

1. Discuss the differences between images and propositions. Why is this significant (pages 2, 3)?
2. Review Romans 1:15-20. What are we learning about the nature of man; what man knows and why Paul is eager to preaching the gospel (page 3)?
3. What should man's response to the knowledge of God be and why (pages 4, 5)?
4. What is the inevitable destination when the truth of God is rejected (pages 5, 6)?
5. Have you experienced a profession of wisdom by the world? Discuss that experience and how one might respond to it (pages 7, 8).
6. What is the foolish exchange that the natural man has made? Can you cite examples of that in the culture in which you live (pages 8, 9)?
7. What exchange is presented to men in the gospel? Discuss how that exchange takes place (page 9).