

Sermons through

Romans

The Open Gate

Romans 1:24, 25

With Study Questions

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7/15/2012*

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Romans 1:24, 25

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

A photo was posted this week of a small dog running like mad. All four paws were high in the air. He looked as if he were flying eight inches above the ground. The camera angle caught the puppy straight on and never has a dog more appeared to be smiling. He was on a path surrounded by nothing but trees and grass. But it was the caption that brought the photo to life. It read: Live Like Someone Left the Gate Open.

It is easy to appreciate the spirit behind that message. I recall the feeling of joy and freedom when I got my first car or when school was out for summer. The shackles are gone, the limits are extended and there is unrestrained freedom to explore! Yet anyone thoughtful person recognizes the potential danger.

After all, for those of us who have puppies or small children, we're very careful not to leave the gate open. And the securing of the gate is not because we don't want them to enjoy life and not (primarily) because of what damage they may cause to others. It is rather the wise and loving

effort of a parent or owner (if a pet) to be protective of those for whom they care.

As a child grows (especially in wisdom) they begin to appreciate that the constraints of their parents were something for which they should be grateful. For the gracious constraints of a loving parent are the very tool that kept the child free; and by free I mean from all the potential cages and entrapments to which young people are susceptible.

It is tempting for a child to think there is this big, great, fascinating world out there (because this, in many ways, is true) and their parents are stifling their ability to explore and enjoy it. But the experienced parent is conversant with this world and knows all too well its many cages. Imagine, if you will, bringing a fearless and inexperienced child to a zoo. Enthralled by the exhibits he wants to survey every cage, inside and out. The parents holds the child back (at times with an actual leash designed for children) lest the child become its own lunchtime performance.

All this to say that a certain level of restraint is necessary to the human good. Back to that in a moment.

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 – the universal epiphany given to all and manifest in all – the knowledge of God or the knowledge that there is a God; a knowledge so certain that it leaves all people **“without excuse” (Romans 1:20)**. This is why Paul is eager to preach the gospel, the gospel being man's only hope.

In verses 21 through 23 we learned what the rejection of truth looks like and where it inevitably leads – a lack of willingness to glorify and be thankful to God followed futility of thought and darkened hearts – a futility and darkness accompanied by a profession of wisdom (Romans 1:21, 22). Finally, there is foolish exchange – the exchange of a glorious incorruptible God for the image of a corruptible man (Romans 1:23).

We begin this morning's message with a "therefore;" God's response to what we've just reviewed.

Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves (Romans 1:24)

Do What You Want

The "therefore" which begins this verse is related to the previous verses where we are informed of man's willful suppression of the truth, his lack of acknowledgment of the glory of God and gratitude along with the foolish exchange of the incorruptible for the corruptible. What does God therefore do? In short, He opens the gate.

He "**gave them up.**" The word *paredoken* means to "deliver over or up to the power of someone."¹ Jesus uses the word to describe being handed over to the judge and "**thrown into prison**" (Matthew 5:25) In this case, that someone to whom we are handed over is ourselves. It is the awful feeling some parents have experienced, not with small children, but with older ones who simply but boldly refuse the counsel of wisdom. It is that feeling which might be accompanied by an open door and the words "Do what you want."

I don't know if I can think of a more fearful place for the soul of a person than Romans 1:24 (also 1:26). Although I believe Paul is writing of the general and universal nature of man, the knowledgeable Israelite would be reminded of the exodus and their rebellion in the wilderness:

¹ Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

But My people would not heed My voice, And Israel would have none of Me. ¹² So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, To walk in their own counsels. ¹³ “Oh, that My people would listen to Me, That Israel would walk in My ways! ¹⁴ I would soon subdue their enemies, And turn My hand against their adversaries. ¹⁵ The haters of the Lord would pretend submission to Him, But their fate would endure forever. ¹⁶ He would have fed them also with the finest of wheat; And with honey from the rock I would have satisfied you (Psalm 81:11-16).

Clearly here God portrays Himself as one who grieves over His covenant people who craved the satisfaction of the world rather than the finest of wheat and honey from the rock – items God would use to demonstrate the continued flow of His love and grace. As a minister, to see this behavior (the desire for autonomy – estrangement from God) in those who are young or old is a source of untold grief.

The True Cage

So if God were to remove His gracious constraint on the human soul; if He were to say “Do what you want” what would that “freedom” look like? The 2nd and 3rd century Christian, Tertullian coined the phrase, “Out of the frying pan, into the fire.” The 20th American social writer, Eric Hoffer, added his own take, explaining, “We feel free when we escape - even if it be but from the frying pan to the fire.”

In the sixties I thought I was expressing my own liberty and individuality by wearing huge bell-bottoms and paisley Nehru shirts. Later it dawned on me that I was very much enslaved to a very narrow (and somewhat short-lived) cultural phenomenon. So what is the true cage when a people liberate themselves from a loving, wise Triune God?

People are given up **“to uncleanness in the lusts of their hearts.”** “Uncleanness” is the Greek word *akatharsian*. Notice the prefix *a-* and the root word *katharos*, which means pure, clean, undefiled, unpolluted. It means to be without purity. The word has clear religious connotations –

one can hardly read a chapter in Leviticus without coming upon some injunction about being clean prior to interaction with God's people.

Simply put, it appears Paul's point here is that the human race, in their rejection of God are left at the mercy of the lusts of their own hearts – hearts Paul has already defined as **“darkened” (Romans 1:21)**. It should be added that **“lusts”** *epithymiais* means strong desire. In the Scriptures it is generally used in a negative sense and frequently addresses irregular and inordinate appetites.²

I think this point needs to be made because the mind-shapers landscaping the modern roads of ethical acceptability have constructed the social more' that if the desire is strong enough and held by a large enough constituency, the only reasonable conclusion we can draw is that it must be decent. They will often appeal to God's creative power to legitimize whatever the desire might be – “God made me this way!”

But this mindset rapidly crumbles when they are offended if their desire is compared to another prevailing desire. I illustrate my point with some portions of a thread I had a few years ago with a writer from *Wired* magazine who had requested to be removed from the distribution list of columns I wrote for a local newspaper. The dialogue went something like this:

Me:

I'll certainly respect your wishes. But since I enjoy the measured and rational approach you take toward your topics, I'd be interested to know what bothers you in my apologetic for biblical Christianity; either way I'll remove you from this list, whether you respond or not. Good Day.

Him:

The anti-gay bigotry is what "bothers" me. Thank you for removing me from your list.

Me:

Please indulge me because I would like to understand your point. Are you saying that if someone believes homosexuality

² Zodhiates, S. (2000). *The complete word study dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.). Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers.

or adultery or polyamorism, etc. is immoral, that it naturally follows that they're a bigot? What about NAMBLA (an organization seeking to lower the consent age to foster physical intimacy with young boys)?

Him:

You have a feeling of enormous confidence. But in long years of reporting, I've learned that being right does not correlate reliably with feeling right. And though you make an outward show of niceness and reasonableness, the assumptions you make are vicious. A simple statement that I abhor your anti-gay bigotry brought forth a cheap and ugly reply, linking homosexuality with child abuse. You can dress this up any way you like, make whatever little excuses and rhetorical maneuvers that might please you, but you've made yourself clear, and your message is ugly.

I must say that I found this conversation emotionally disturbing. Whether justified or not, it is difficult to be accused of being vicious, bigoted, cheap and ugly. But I was not seeking to take a cheap shot. I sincerely wanted to hear from a cultural icon; by what standard do you say 'yes' to one intense desire and say 'no' to another. The members of one people-group can just as easily assert that they are wired (excuse the pun) that way as the members of another group. It is a logical/ethical investigation by analogy and it really needs to be answered.

Of course (getting back to the text) the answer is given by Paul. In the rejection of God, the human race is governed by its own passions (feeling right) and the consequences continue **“to dishonor their bodies among themselves.”**

Dishonored Vessels

In chapter 9 (verse 21) Paul will write about people as “vessels” of “honor” and “dishonor.” We might think of a precious heirloom given by a special grandparent placed on the mantles of our fireplaces – a vessel which conjures up lofty thoughts and memories. Compare that to a vessel we might use to clean up after an animal. And the manifestation of this

disgrace is visibly demonstrated in the way humans use their bodies – a topic Paul will address in greater detail in the verses ahead. Suffice it to say for now that that which should be a source of shame and embarrassment has shifted itself to center-stage with spotlight.

When God opens the gate, fear of punishment and remorse are the first ones out of the yard. W. G. T. Shedd explains:

The vices mentioned in the context, to which men were given over, were unaccompanied with either fear or remorse, and were pursued with a cynical and brazen shamelessness.³

Charles Hodges call it

A judicial abandonment...the punishment of sin is sin...as an avenger.⁴

Paul then reemphasizes what he had already taught in verse 23.

...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 1:25)

Refuge of Lies

The thing about a lie (as has been briefly demonstrated above) is that it cannot survive an internal critique; it will inevitably collapse on itself. One may say the don't believe in a God who is the source of all that is, whether material or immaterial – things concrete and things ethical – but it is altogether another matter to say it is unreasonable to believe in such a God. The matter becomes stickier when sinful man begins to realize that the only thing that separates him from other sinful men (sinful men that perhaps disgust him) is his own opinion – resulting in self-deification.

This is what happens when one exchanges the truth of God for the lie. The utter folly of this was addressed by Isaiah hundreds of years before the birth of Christ.

³ William G. T. Shedd. *A Critical Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, p. 25.

⁴ Charles Hodge. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p 40.

Because you have said, “We have made a covenant with death, And with Sheol we are in agreement. When the overflowing scourge passes through, It will not come to us, For we have made lies our refuge, And under falsehood we have hidden ourselves (Isaiah 28:15).

But the refuge of lies is a house of cards; and its walls offer a mere fantasy of protection. Somewhat graphic words in Jeremiah:

This is your lot, The portion of your measures from Me,” says the Lord, “Because you have forgotten Me And trusted in falsehood. ²⁶ Therefore I will uncover your skirts over your face, That your shame may appear. ²⁷ I have seen your adulteries And your *lustful* neighings, The lewdness of your harlotry, Your abominations on the hills in the fields. Woe to you, O Jerusalem! Will you still not be made clean (Jeremiah 13:25-27)?

Three chapters later we read of a refuge which is sure and true.

O Lord, my strength and my fortress, My refuge in the day of affliction, The Gentiles shall come to You From the ends of the earth and say, “Surely our fathers have inherited lies, Worthlessness and unprofitable *things*.” ²⁰ Will a man make gods for himself, Which *are* not gods? ²¹ “Therefore behold, I will this once cause them to know, I will cause them to know My hand and My might; And they shall know that My name *is* the Lord (Jeremiah 16:19-21).

A Doxology

Paul writes of “serving” and “worshiping” the creature rather than the creator. Worship and serve indicate inward reverence and outward service. He then pauses to offer this doxology “**who is blessed for ever! Amen –**

By this doxology the apostle instinctively relieves the horror which the penning of such things excited within his breast; an example to such as are called to expose like dishonor done to the blessed God.⁵

Remembering the Theme

I would like to finish with this thought – for those of us who are comforted with the notion that Paul’s testimony vis-à-vis humanity affirms our own thoughts and validates our convictions – that is not the purpose of Romans. Let us not stray from the theme of this great epistle – an epistle about God and His faithfulness. Let us remember that Paul’s treatise on human nature leaves every last one of us “inexcusable” before His holy searching judgments.

Let us remember that Paul is explaining why he is eager to preach the gospel. His love for God – his disposition of indebtedness to all men – his heart’s desire and prayer that men might be saved. As he has imitated Christ, let us imitate him. And may our praise and worship of God be elevated as we ponder the great darkness from which we have all been delivered.

⁵ Jamieson, R., Fausset, A. R., & Brown, D. (1997). *Commentary Critical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible* (Ro 1:25). Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

Questions for Study

1. Are there values in restrains? Can you give some examples (pages 2, 3)?
2. How does God respond to man's willful suppression of the truth (page 4)?
3. Is letting someone do what they want always good or always bad? How does this apply to God's response to mankind (pages 4, 5)?
4. What are some of the true cages of man's quest for liberty from God (pages 5, 6)?
5. According to Hodge, what is the punishment for sin? Explain (page 8).
6. What is meant by a "refuge of lies?" What is the danger here (pages 8, 9)?
7. What should we always remember as we examine Paul's treatise on human nature (page 10)?