

POTOMAC HILLS COMMUNITY CHURCH

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“The Grace of God in the Gospel”

A Series on Romans

Romans 1.21-32, *“The Ignorance of the Gospel”*

INTRODUCTION: *“The Imagination and the Will”*¹

In a recent newsletter, the Christian Theologian and Apologist Ravi Zacharias wrote about his son, Nathan. Listen to what he said ...

“When our son Nathan was only nine years old, he decided that he was going to write a book. He decided this because he saw me at the computer every day and thought writing would be fun. He did quite a job actually, sandwiching a murder, a kidnapping, and all the other horrible stuff that grabs a person's attention within his carefully molded chapters. But one day I noticed that he was sitting at the dining room table, pen in hand and the story in front of him, with tears running down his face. I wondered what on earth had happened. I went over and put my arm around him and asked, "What's the matter, son?"

"I just know the dog is going to die," he said.

I did everything I could to keep a straight face as he unfolded the story line that involved this marvelous little dog that now took ill. He just knew that death would be the logical end to the impressive pet.

Isn't that amazing? The power of the imagination draws in even the storyteller and become sovereign over the one who was creating the fantasy in the first place! I have often looked back upon my own life, and I have come to realize how powerful the imagination is and how it can be used for good or evil. The French thinker Pascal said: "If the greatest philosopher in the world find himself upon a plank wider than actually necessary, but hanging over a precipice, his imagination will prevail, though his reason convince him of his safety."

In other words, our imagination can even distort reality.

This is just one of the reasons I believe the Lord Jesus tells us to keep our eye single. What we see and what we enjoy in our seeing has a direct bearing upon the imagination. Let me ask you this question: Are you disciplined to bring reason and will to bear upon the imagination?

The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the Church at Rome, chronicles how the human mind works when it turns away from God. He says that although people knew God, they did not respond to that **which they knew** and as a result their **minds became corrupt**. Knowledge of truth and the response to it are the surest strengths against the power of a corrupted imagination.”

And that is the passage we've come to this morning.

It deals with how a corrupt mind and a corrupt heart lead us ... to unbelief and it answers the question of how unbelief then ... affects how we act.

¹ Adapted from the email newsletter, "A Slice of Infinity" by Ravi Zacharias, 8/2/04. Copyright (c) 2004 Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM) "A Slice of Infinity" is aimed at reaching into the culture with words of challenge, words of truth, and words of hope. If you know of others who would enjoy receiving "A Slice of Infinity", they can sign up at www.rzim.org/publications/slice.php or send an email to slice-html-subscribe@lists.rzim.org

But once again, let's briefly look at the

CONTEXT: *The Significance of the Roman Epistle* ²

The book of Romans speaks to us today just as powerfully as it spoke to people in the first century, most of all; it **profoundly brings the knowledge of God Himself** ... to us. My goal, however, is not merely to increase your knowledge. Knowledge is important, but it is never the final purpose of reading and hearing the Bible. My ultimate goal is that your life might be **changed** as a result of studying God's Word. The Puritans talked about "practical divinity" and "the doctrine of living to God." That's what we want as we study this great book.

Remember, this is God's Word to you. It is not an abstract treatise or a dull, dry doctrinal dissertation. Every word is for you! Every word applies to you!

This is God's Word for Potomac Hills Community Church in 2004.

In the words of Francis Schaeffer, this is "true truth." Romans is **NOT** just religious truth. Romans **IS** all about the world the way it really is.

As we turn to the book of Romans, we begin by searching for the key word that gives us the theme of the book. We don't have to look far to find it. The key word is found in verse 1, "*Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.*" Notice the phrase ... "***the gospel of God.***" Now look in verse 2, "***which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures,***" Drop down to verse 9, "*For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son,*" Look at verse 15, "*So I am eager to preach the gospel to you also who are in Rome.*" Finally, he comes to his theme in verse 16, "***For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.***" Verse 17 adds an explanation, "***For in it [the Gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'***"

What is the theme of the book?

The Gospel.

What is Paul writing about?

The Gospel.

What is the key word of Romans?

The Gospel.

This is what the book of Romans is all about.

If you don't grasp this, the rest of the book will make little sense to you. And you best grasp it ... since we're going to be here for awhile.

It's the essence of Paul's theology.

It's the reason he wants to come to Rome.

More than that, it's the heart of evangelical theology.

This is the text that launched the Protestant Reformation and it is this text that most clearly explains The Grace of God in the Gospel.

Let's lay it out in four simple statements:

Romans is all about the Gospel. We find that in the very first verse.

The Gospel is wrapped up in the historical truth of the person of Jesus Christ. Paul explains that in verses 2-4.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is good news because it has life-changing power. That statement comes from verse 16.

The Gospel saves those who believe it because it reveals the righteousness of God. That comes from verse 17.

² Most of the Context is adapted from *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans 1-8*, by John MacArthur, pages ix-xxii; and the sermon, "To Rome With Love," by Ray Pritchard, Calvary Memorial Church, Oak Park, IL, 1/5/92.

Romans is all about the Gospel, the good news about Jesus Christ and the difference He can make when He comes into your life. In fact, the English word Gospel comes from the Old English godspell, which means good tidings, or as we would say, good news. Romans is about **the Gospel, God's Good News.**

Paul's letter to the church at Rome was, among other things, an introduction of himself as an apostle. He clearly set forth the Gospel, so that believers in Rome would have complete confidence in what he preached and taught. He penned a monumental treatise to establish them in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The apostle is tremendously concerned that the Roman people receive what he has to say — that they not “turn him off” before they have read his arguments. Thus, he reveals himself and his theology, hoping that if they understand something of who he is and what he believes, they will give him a fair hearing.

And so now Paul introduces us to his understanding of what “*The Grace of God in the Gospel*” actually means, and which, if appropriated, can produce power in us to live the Christian life.

Let me give you two statements that sum up the importance of this book:

One, it's the clearest statement of the Gospel in the New Testament. Nowhere is God's plan of salvation made so plain as in Romans. In this letter—as in no other—Paul lays out God's method of saving sinners—through justification by faith wholly apart from the works of the law.

Two, it offers the most penetrating analysis of the moral condition of mankind. Why is the human race in such a mess? Why do men and women turn away from the truth? Why is there no peace on earth? What about those who have never heard the Gospel? What happens to them? In the next few weeks (... or months ... or years) we'll discover God's answers to these crucial questions.

This series on Romans is a golden opportunity – a precious window of time. We are moving slowly so that you can think and study and read and discuss and review and check things out and pray over what you hear. This series has the potential of taking you deep into the heart and mind of God – if you want to go there. I plead with you: Do not be passive, don't coast. Make the thought of this letter the thought of your mind. Build your whole way of thinking and feeling out of the building blocks in this great letter. Let's open this book, but as always, do it carefully, as it may well change your life ...

Because I will be extensively using two translations in this series, I have printed the text for you in the outline in both the **English Standard Version** (which is a static, or word-for-word translation and more accurate to the Greek) and in the **New Living Translation** (which is a dynamic, or meaning-for-meaning translation and more accurate to the English).

I'm not going to read it now, but as we go through it ...

Romans 1:21-32, *“For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*

[24] Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

[26] For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; [27] and the men likewise

gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

*[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. [29] They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, [30] slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, [31] foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. [32] **Though** they know God's decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them."*

Romans 1:21-32, *"Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship Him as God or even give Him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. The result was that their minds became dark and confused. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became utter fools instead. [23] And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people, or birds and animals and snakes.*

[24] So God let them go ahead and do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. [25] Instead of believing what they knew was the truth about God, they deliberately chose to believe lies. So they worshiped the things God made but not the Creator himself, who is to be praised forever. Amen.

[26] That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires. Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other. [27] And the men, instead of having normal sexual relationships with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men and, as a result, suffered within themselves the penalty they so richly deserved.

[28] When they refused to acknowledge God, He abandoned them to their evil minds and let them do things that should never be done. [29] Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, fighting, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. [30] They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They are forever inventing new ways of sinning and are disobedient to their parents. [31] They refuse to understand, break their promises, and are heartless and unforgiving. [32] They are fully aware of God's death penalty for those who do these things, yet they go right ahead and do them anyway. And, worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too."

Before we dive into this text, we have to back up a little bit to last week's text ...

v. 18-20: BACKGROUND: THE WRATH OF GOD³

Paul begins these hard words by saying in **Romans 1:18**, *"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth."*

God is a God of "wrath," or as the New Living Translation has it, "anger."

It is important that we understand exactly what this means or the rest of the passage will be confusing.

First, it does not mean that God is given to a capricious, uncontrolled anger. There are two basic words in the Greek language used to express anger. From *thumos* we get our words *thermometer* and *thermos*. This is red-hot anger — the kind that overcomes people when they

³ The exposition of the text is adapted from the messages "The Lostness of Humankind," by Ravi Zacharias, [Preaching Today](#), tape #118; [Preaching the Word: Romans](#) by Kent Hughes, pages 35-49.

lose control and smack someone on the nose. It is impulsive and passionate. That is **not** the word used in our text. The word here is *orge*, which signifies a settled and abiding condition. It is controlled. ***“The wrath of God”*** is not human wrath, which at its best is only a distorted reflection of God’s wrath because it is always compromised by the presence of sin.

“The wrath of God” is perfect, settled, controlled.

Second, this wrath of God is parallel to the righteousness of God. You will notice that the opening line of verse 17 contains the phrase, *“the righteousness of God is revealed...”* and the opening of verse 18 says, *“The wrath of God is revealed.”* The wrath of God is a counterpart to the righteousness of God.

Third, God’s wrath is not directed against goodness, but *“against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.”* ***“The wrath of God”*** does not portray a Deity who “flies off the handle” and indiscriminately thumps anybody who happens to be at hand. God’s wrath is perfect as to its quality and its object. That is the general concept we must keep in mind as we go through our passage.

As Paul continues, he gets very specific as to why the ungodly and unrighteous are under God’s wrath, and in doing so he gives us somewhat of an anatomy of unbelief. This passage can help the unbeliever come to belief and can help the believer grasp the distinctives of unbelief and become better equipped to live out Christianity in an unbelieving world.

And we’ll start with ...

v. 21-32: THE STAGES OF UNBELIEF

There are four stages of unbelief and Paul starts with the simplest one ...

v. 21: Stage One is INGRATITUDE⁴

Romans 1:21, *“For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”*

Man started this whole mess with ingratitude. Proud people don't say thanks. Creation teaches us that an infinitely marvelous, eternally powerful Being created us and all we have. Therefore we are His creatures. He owns us. Our life, our breath, and everything we have is a gift. Our duty is simply to be thankful to Him from our heart and to cherish His glory. The humbling truth is that all of us have fallen short of this duty.

A man who was nailing down a loose shingle on a roof lost his footing and began to slip. Working three stories above ground, he was terrified at the thought of falling to his death. He started shouting, “God, help me! I am falling! God, do something!” Just as he came to the edge of the roof, his belt loop caught on a nail and stopped him long enough to grab hold again. He shouted, “It’s OK, God! I got caught on a nail.”

That is how we can be. We cry out to God. He answers our prayers. Then we say, “It’s OK, God ... everything seemed to work out.” We never stop and think that God might have worked through circumstances to come to our rescue.

We refuse to thank God ... apparently ... for much of anything.

And ingratitude is the outward action of a sinful heart.

Ravi Zacharias tells a great story about a little girl whose mother planned a very special birthday party for her. She planned to impress all her relatives by having the little girl sing them a song. And so she told the girl what to sing, and how to sing it, and when to sing it.

⁴ A small part of this section comes from the message, “Proud People Don’t Say Thanks” by John Piper, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, MN, November 20, 1983, www.desiringGOD.org;

When it came time for the little girl to sing at her party, her mother said, “Honey, what are you going to do for us now?”

And the child said ... “Nothing.”

The mother found a convenient spot to apply a little pressure and said, “Weren’t you going to sing?”

And the child said ... “No.”

So the mother got angry and took the child upstairs to her bedroom and shut her in her closet. About a half hour later, the mother goes up there and says, “What are you doing up here?”

And the child says ... “I’ve been having a great time. I’ve been **spitting** on your clothes. I’ve been **spitting** in your shoes. I’ve been **spitting** on your walls. I’ve been **spitting** on your carpet. And now I’m waiting for some more **spit**.”

Waiting for more **spit** is what sin is all about.

For us, sin is not just an act. Sin is an attitude. No one is a sinner because he has done something sinful. He has done something sinful because he is already a sinner. The offense is not only in the action but also in the intention. Sin is not merely a violation of God’s law but it is found in the disposition of our hearts. And when your heart is bad toward God, you move quickly from ingratitude to ...

v. 21-23: Stage Two is **IDOLATRY**

Romans 1:21-23, “*For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks to Him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.*”

The opening phrase of verse 21 tells how this perversion to idolatry initially came about. “*For although they knew God, they did not honor Him as God...*” means there was a time when idolaters saw God as majestic, transcendent, all-powerful, infinitely greater than themselves. However, though they understood this, they did **not** honor Him, but instead worshiped images like themselves. They refused to worship God for who He is and rather reduced Him to their own level through idolatry. They minimized the vast chasm between the creature and the Creator. This resulted in a progressively degenerating idolatry. At the end of the verse Paul says, “*their foolish hearts were darkened.*” This is significant because “**heart**” is a comprehensive term for all man’s faculties.

Once, upon seeing a series of newspaper articles on “What’s Wrong with the World?” G. K. Chesterton, the famous author, sent a short letter to the editor.

“Dear Sir: Regarding your article ‘What’s Wrong with the World?’ **I am**. Yours Truly, G. K. Chesterton.”

I am what’s wrong with the world. God has told us for centuries that the fundamental problem with man is his heart. The Bible is explicit that the heart of man is twisted, almost demonic. The bible uses the word ‘**SIN**.’ Implicit in that word is the statement that the bent of man is toward evil.

Not only was their moral judgment darkened, but their intellect and reasoning suffered as well. The magnificent idea of God as revealed in Nature was **lost** to them. The tragedy of idolatry is that it falls infinitely short of giving its people any idea of what God is really like! Verse 22 says, “*Claiming to be wise, they became fools.*” The root word for “fools” is the same root from which we get our word **moron**. This is an ugly term which refers not so much to one’s

intellect as to his **moral** condition.

Verse 23 portrays the progressive degeneration that the perversion of idolatry brings. First they worshiped an image of a man, second birds, then animals, and ultimately reptiles — crawling things.

You can't get any lower than that.

So we see that first man suppresses the truth about the greatness of God, and then he perverts it by worshiping insulting images. In essence, having gotten rid of the true knowledge of God, he worships images with which he is comfortable.

The ungodly man worships himself.

As we learned last week, according to Romans 1:20, we must keep before us the “**eternal power and divine nature**” of God as revealed in creation! We must always consciously strive to remember His majestic transcendence or we will fall into idolatry. Quite frankly, even those of us in the evangelical tradition, with its emphasis on the availability of God in Christ, are in danger of this form of idolatry. Very often we hear God addressed in such casual terms that it would scandalize some of our unbelieving friends. Sometimes we hear music that so sentimentalizes Christ that He is emptied of His divinity. **We need to be careful!** We must never address God with anything but the most humble attitude. We must never joke about Him or about divine things. We must keep our own status as His creation and His supremacy as the Creator always before us.

To place ourselves on equal terms is, in and of itself, a form of idolatry.

God is your Sovereign, your King, your Creator, your Ruler, Your Judge ...

He is not your homeboy ... as a popular t-shirt would have it.

God does not appear on your “buddy list.”

And to think that He does is just a subtle form of idolatry.

But idolatry doesn't end with merely deluding ourselves, it leads from delusion into debauchery, because ...

v. 24-31: Stage Three is IMMORALITY

The most distinctive stage of unbelief is the perversion of life itself.

Romans 1:24-25, “*Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, [25] because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.*”

The logic here is so clear: first a suppression of the majestic revelation of God expressed in ingratitude, then a perversion to man-centered idolatry, and then a perversion of man himself. In the end, man lowers himself to a condition below God's created purpose. As we will see, man, having rejected the witness of God in creation, goes on to live contrary to the very order of creation.

Ingratitude leads to Idolatry which leads to Immorality. And know that we have seen something of the “why” of the wrath of God, but our text also tells us something of the “how” of God's wrath, “**God gave them up.**”

This horrible phrase is repeated three times before chapter 1 closes. God avenges Himself by allowing the decline of evil men and women. That is what we see today all around us — men and women slipped to such depths that it would disgrace animals to have such conduct among them. God's wrath is all around us, and it seems that more wrath (God's giving people up to sin) is falling daily.

There is one other aspect of the “*wrath of God*” which is demanded by the parallelism with “*the righteousness from God*” in verse 17.

Just as “the righteousness from God” was best revealed in Christ’s death on the cross, so too is the wrath of God. We understand from the Gospels that after Jesus gave his mother to John, darkness fell upon the land from the sixth hour until the ninth hour. Was this darkness sent to hide the hideous physical sufferings of God’s Son? No. It was to hide the agony of His Son as He became a curse for us. In Jewish thinking, to be cursed was to be separated from God. Jesus had never known anything but fellowship with the Father. They had worked together in the creation of the universe. They were one another’s delight. Now, as Jesus bore our sins, He became a curse, **Galatians 3:13**, “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—*

At this moment of separation, the pain from the nails was nothing to Jesus. Neither was the flayed back or the uneven stake. There is no experience so painful as separation from God. Jesus cried out, **Psalm 22:1**, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” The wrath of God against our sin was seen when Christ suffered alone for our sins.

If a man is not a Christian, it is because he is suppressing the truth about God, pushing down God’s own revelation of who He is. Further, he is not a Christian because he is given to idolatry. Martin Luther said, “Whatever your heart clings to and relies on is your god.” An unbeliever has his own “self-created gods.” Finally, he is under God’s wrath when he fails to acknowledge in his heart of hearts the extent of his sin. And if he dies without Christ he will go to Hell.

Jesus said, **John 3:36**, “*Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.*”

Consider the two revelations: the revelation of the wrath of God justly coming upon all mankind because man suppresses the truth in ingratitude, perverts the truth in idolatry, and perverts life in immorality, and secondly the revelation of the righteousness of God from faith to faith, righteousness He gives us so we can stand righteous before Him. If one does not have the righteousness of God . . . he or she has the wrath of God. Those are the two revelations and the two choices. Are you under the wrath of God today? Or do you cling to the righteousness of God which has been revealed to you?

God’s grace brings freedom from bondage, light from darkness, life from death. We should keep this in mind as we tunnel through the final verses of Romans 1 because it’s a dark journey. To be frank, these verses leave little to smile about. At the same time, the truth they hold is needed as much today as at any other time in history — especially in the history of our nation.

As we have seen, the background of the passage consists of this: All unbelievers suppress the truth of God’s “eternal power and divine nature.” As they refuse to honor him and exchange the great truth for a lie, they bring about an idol-making perversion of the truth. Finally their suppression and perversion of the truth culminates in a perversion of life, until God gives them over to their sin.

God allows men and women to go as far down as they desire. His wrath is shown in the **removal** of His restraining power. What we have in the rest of these verses are the dimensions of the depravity to which unbelieving men and women will go in working out God’s wrath on themselves.

It is **good** to consider all this because any Christian who truly grasps mankind’s

depravity will be more effective in living for Christ in this fallen world. There are two main aspects of man's fallenness into immorality: Sensual and Mental. As we discuss the sensual, I will try to stay within the bounds of propriety. At the same time I must speak frankly about what the text says.

- **Sensual Immorality** ⁵

Romans 1:26-27, *“For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; [27] and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.”*

In plain language Paul was referring to sexual perversion, both heterosexual (Romans 1:24) and homosexual (Romans 1:26-27). While both are in view, the emphasis is on homosexuality as an illustration of the **extremity** of mankind's depravity. There is no doubt as to what the apostle is speaking about. Why does Paul, in describing the depth of mankind's depravity, turn first to sexual sin — especially homosexuality? There are other sins which are just as bad.

As C. S. Lewis wrote, “If anyone thinks that Christians regard unchastity as the supreme vice, he is quite wrong. The sins of the flesh are bad, but they are the least bad of all sins. All the worst pleasures are purely spiritual. The pleasure of putting other people in the wrong, of bossing and patronizing and spoiling sport, and backbiting; the pleasure of power, of hatred. For there are two things inside me competing with the human self which I must try to become: they are the animal self, and the diabolical self: and the diabolical self is the worst of the two. That is why a cold, self-righteous prig, who goes regularly to church, may be far nearer to hell than a prostitute.”

Why then does Paul single out homosexuality? Because it is so obviously unnatural, and therefore automatically underlines the extent to which sin takes mankind. Other sins are just as evil, but they are naturally evil. God has emphasized this sin to show us that inside the unbelieving man is a running sore which indicates a far deeper dimension of the wounds of sinful society.

I'd offer a brief word to those who are involved in homosexuality. First of all, it's not a lifestyle choice, it's not part of the created order, it's not a sickness; homosexuality is a sin, and that ought to be **encouraging** because there's a **remedy for sin**, whereas many sicknesses have no cure. The Scriptures indicate that homosexuality is a sin from which one can recover, **1 Corinthians 6:9-11**, *“Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: **neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality**, [10] nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. [11] **And such were some of you**. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”*

Some of the Corinthians were previously homosexuals, drunkards, thieves, but they were “washed” — **they were cleansed ... from their sins.**

Paul also emphasized this sin because it was all around him. He was writing from Corinth, the sin capital of the Roman Empire. Greek culture taught that homosexual love was the purest and highest of loves. Many highborn Greeks maintained male lovers along with their

⁵ C. S. Lewis quote comes from his book, Mere Christianity, pages 94-95.

wives. It was no different in Rome. Fourteen of the first fifteen emperors were homosexuals. Sounds like today, right? Romans 1 describes any major city in the world today: Tokyo, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Calcutta, Kiev, Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Amsterdam, London, Boston, New York, Chicago, and San Francisco.

A mainline denomination's magazine carried an admonishment that said essentially this: Homosexuality should be accepted as a variant lifestyle — the homosexual relationship is neither unnatural, nor sick, nor sinful. In this article practicing homosexuals were portrayed as whole, healthy, appealing persons.

The Apostle Paul could not disagree more. Paul is describing the running sores of a depraved society which has suppressed the truth of God — and it turns out that he is describing **our** country, **our** town, **our** neighborhood. Where these things exist, so do all the elements of depravity.

At the end of verse 27 Paul completes his thoughts on this subject with an ominous statement, *“and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.”* Anyone who has counseled those in bondage to this sin know what Paul is talking about — a loss of personal identity, an uncertainty as to one's role and place in life. Yet, there is another element to this which is substantiated by the statement's parallelism with verse 24 (“the degrading of their bodies”). God's wrath falls as a penalty on their very bodies.

An August 1972 issue of *Time* magazine said, “After the ordinary cold, syphilis and gonorrhea are the most common infectious diseases among young people, outranking all cases of hepatitis, measles, mumps, scarlet fever, strep throat and tuberculosis put together.”

That was 1972. Ten years later, in August 1982, A *Time* magazine cover story, “The New Scarlet Letter,” revealed that an estimated 20,000,000 Americans now have sexually-transmitted herpes. Worse, it is completely incurable. The reason for the virus's exponential increase, according to *Time*, has been the escalation of sexual license.

By far the most terrifying event to those involved in sexual perversion is the occurrence, not exclusively, but largely in the gay community, of AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), from which the victims lose their immunities to disease and eventually die of pneumonia or cancer.

This *“receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error”* is an outworking of the wrath of God because of the suppression of the truth. But it is also a sign of the grace of God, for a couple of reasons.

First, the fear of contracting a sexually-transmitted disease is a great inducement to refrain from sexual license. Married and unmarried philanderers have become extremely wary. Monogamy and fidelity are on the upswing.

But there is a second element of God's grace — and that is that some people, through the pain of disease and personal fragmentation, have come to the end of themselves and have become finally ready for a massive dose of God's grace. It is their only hope.

As we have seen, sexual license — especially homosexuality — reveals to us the dimensions of a society's depravity. According to Biblical revelation, what we see around us means that our particular culture is on the skids. If we are believers, this encourages us to draw close to Christ so that we are really living what we say we believe. If we are unbelievers, it is meant to drive us to Christ.

Most of us are not caught in the sins of gross immorality. But none of us, can truly deny experiencing most of the dimensions of mental immorality.

- **Mental Immorality**⁶

Paul says that unbelieving minds become depraved minds, **Romans 1:28**, “*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.*”

Literally, they were given over to a “rejected mind.” They rejected God, and God rejected their mental attitude. One commentator says that such a mind is “so debilitated and corrupted as to be a quite untrustworthy guide in moral decision.”

The Bible’s view is that in the last analysis atheism is less the product of misguided searching, a kind of intellectual mistake, than a defiant act stubborn rebellion. “*They did not see fit to acknowledge God.*” The fact that atheism is not widely seen that way is itself an index of our depravity. In fact, the best-informed atheists commonly acknowledge the connection between morality and belief, between immorality and unbelief. There is a famous passage in Aldus Huxley that acknowledges that one of the driving forces behind atheistic naturalism is the desire to tear away any sort of moral condemnation of otherwise condemned behavior. In a passage scarcely less famous, Michel Foucault, one of the philosophers who formulated the theories behind postmodernism, frankly acknowledges that it became important for him to **destroy** traditional notions of truth and morality because he wished to justify his own sexual conduct.

A few years ago, Foucault dies of AIDS.

Paul then gives, in verses 29-31, the specific dimensions of a depraved mind. It would be easy to imagine that these are the exaggerations of a hysterical moralist, but the Greek and Roman writers said the same things themselves — and sometimes much more. James Montgomery Boice called these three verses, “lifting the lid on hell.” **Romans 1:29-31**, “*They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, [30] slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, [31] foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.*”

These are the dimensions of the “depraved [or rejected] mind.” Not all those who are without Christ have done all these things, but these kinds of things come most naturally to them. The tendency is for deeper and deeper decline, until finally you move from ingratitude to idolatry to immorality to ...

v. 32: Stage Four is INVERSION

The word ‘inversion’ literally means “To turn inside out or upside down.” Its second meaning is “To reverse the position, order, or condition of something.”

In this case, the something being reversed is **man’s moral character**. **Romans 1:32**, “*Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.*”

In the **New Living**, Romans 1:32 is translated this way, “*They are fully aware of God’s death penalty for those who do these things, yet they go right ahead and do them anyway. And, worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too.*” And in **the Message**, a particularly appropriate paraphrase, Romans 1:32 says, “*And it’s not as if they don’t know better. They know perfectly well they’re **spitting** in God’s face. And they don’t care—worse, they hand out prizes to those who do the worst things best!*”

⁶ Section on Aldus Huxley and Michel Foucault comes from the email newsletter “For The Love Of God” by D. A. Carson, August 11, 2004, you can subscribe at christwaymedia-subscribe@associate.com

Man reaches the depths of depravity when he heartily applauds those who give themselves to sin. To delight in those who do evil is a sure way to become even more degraded than the sinners one observes. This, I think, was one of the horrors of the Roman Coliseum. Those committing the mayhem were guilty, but those watching and applauding were even more wretched. Approving another's sin or encouraging another's sin is a sign that life has reached its lowest dimension.

Christians aren't exempt from this. Satan knows that if he can get us to laugh at things we believe we would never do, our defenses will fall. Maybe someday our unwitting approval will give way to action. We need to be careful what we watch and applaud.

I few months ago, I preached from Psalm 8, and I want to repeat something from that sermon, "Although we're made in God's image and ordained to rule under His authority, men and women have increasingly turned their backs on God. And since we won't look upward towards God, which is both our privilege and duty, we wind up looking downward toward the beasts and so become increasingly like them instead. And we do things the animals wouldn't even dream of."

Does anyone really doubt that people today are becoming more like the animals than we are becoming more like Christ? You only have to read one day's newspaper to get a list of horror stories on man's behavior. And it's becoming so common we don't even see it or react to it much anymore.

As our society has moved downward toward the beast, no one seems able to say, "This far and no further." No one can put a limit on sensuality. Homosexuality is old hat. Now there are organizations promoting pedophilia and incest. Our culture has been unable to draw the line on virtually any sort of depravity. Pornography is now one of the biggest industries in America. **CONCLUSION: *What is the answer?***⁷

What is the answer? Why does God give a civilization over to this kind of thing? He does it because when darkness prevails, and despair and violence are widespread, men and women are most ready to come to the light. He gives mankind up so that **in their despair** they might give themselves to His grace. Do you remember Isaiah's prediction? **Isaiah 9:2**, "*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.*"

In the first century mankind was sunk in the darkness of despair. Idolatry had penetrated the whole world. Men had turned from the true God, whom they could have known. In that hour, in the darkness of the night, over the skies of Bethlehem the angels broke through, and a great light of hope shone forth. From that hope all light streams. The angels' message was the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, the availability of the gift of "righteousness from God" (Romans 1:17).

Man is not just unethical. He is lost and dead. If man is only lost in guilt, what I have to tell you is bad news. But if he's lost in sin ... then it is our great privilege to tell him that we have a Savior. The biggest difference between Jesus Christ and the ethical and moral teachers who have been deified by man is that they have come on their television shows to make bad people good.

Jesus Christ came to make dead people live.

East or west, north or south, ancient or modern, the problem is the same, and the solution is the same.

⁷ A small part of the conclusion is taken from [From Guilt to Glory: Volume 1](#) by Ray Stedman, page 34.

Against the growing darkness of our own time we need to make this message as clear as we possibly can — by our testimony, by our lives, by the joy and peace of Christ in our hearts. God has found a way to break through human weakness, arrogance, despair, and sinfulness to give us peace, joy and hope. Just as Jesus was born in Bethlehem so long ago, so He can be born in any person now.

Christ came in the darkest night, and He can meet us even today ... in the darkest of places ... even in the darkest of souls.

This is the good news of the gospel.

And all who believe it said, "Amen."