

**Sin-Hearing the Bad News First in Order to Get the Good News:
“The Idolatry of the Gentiles”**

In the early 70's Dr. Karl Menninger, a famous American Psychiatrist, wrote a best-selling book entitled, *“Whatever Became of Sin?”* In that book he lamented the disappearance of the concept of sin from the psyche and vocabulary of American society. What was once a common word on the lips of every human being, whether they were religious or not, had begun to disappear. Sure, there were people who still felt vague feelings of guilt from time to time but the idea that someone could do something that was considered to be a moral affront against God and neighbor had begun to slip away.

Why? The short answer is sin! Human beings have an amazing capacity to rationalize, relativize, water-down, redefine, and do away with concepts that infringe upon that middle letter in the word sin, “I.” Philosophically what has happened in our culture is can be called moral relativism.

The Erosion of Sin in the American Conscience

According to moral relativism there are no absolute moral and spiritual truths and there really is no clear right and wrong. What is right is whatever you decide is right, so long as it does not hurt anybody else, which may be the only absolute according to moral relativism, and whatever you decide is wrong is wrong, but what is right and wrong for you is not necessarily right and wrong for somebody else, because truth and morality is relative, and each person gets to determine for themselves their own moral standards. This kind of thinking has led us down a path of rationalizing everything, calling good evil and evil good, the shirking of personal responsibility for one's moral failings, and the eliminating of the concept of sin from our conscience.

Sin is now an outdated word. It is a word that nobody wants to hear because it infringes on the “I” in sin. This is not only true in the culture but it is also true in the church.

Theological liberalism has fought hard to do away with the concept of sin, even though they would not say that, because at the heart of much theological liberalism is the flawed belief that human beings are basically good, not sinners, and with just a little bit of help and education we can create a utopian society free of violence and discrimination. Not to mention that theological liberalism has little tolerance for what they see as outdated “traditional” ideas of morality.

But it is not just theological liberalism that has affected the church, there is also a wing American evangelicalism that has succumbed to doing away with the concept of sin. We see this in some of the positive thinking preachers who make it their aim to stroke their congregant's ego every Sunday, being careful not to offend them with a message that might be deemed too depressing. So you get the same message every Sunday. God loves you. God is not mad at you. God wants the best for you. God wants to bless you. God wants to heal you. God wants you to feel good and not feel guilty, and on and on and on. There is some truth in some of that stuff but it is an understatement of the grossest kind to say that it lacks teaching on the holiness of God or on the true condition of the human soul.

Today we encounter in a stark kind of way the Biblical doctrine of sin in Romans chapter 1. In fact we will encounter this doctrine for two more chapters in Paul's letter to the Romans.

What Paul is doing in the first three chapters of Romans is he is making the case that all of humanity, every single person on the face of the earth, both Jew and Gentile, has sinned against God and because they have they have alienated themselves from God, severed the relationship if you will, and as a consequence they have incurred the wrath and judgment of God in their lives because of sin.

God hates sin and the reason he does so is because first it is contrary to his will for mankind and therefore sin is offensive to His holiness and justice. Sin is dark and the Bible says that "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all." And then second God hates sin because He loves us enough to hate it because of what sin does to us; it destroys us, "the wages of sin is death," God does not like the fact that sin is wreaking death on his creation.

The reason that Paul begins telling the story of the gospel in this negative kind of way is because he knows, rightly, that unless a human being understands his true standing before God he will never understand and embrace the good news of the gospel. The gospel does not and cannot make sense apart from the bad news. For it is the reality of the bad news that necessitates the creation of the good news that God made when he sent his Son into the world to save it. In short, if you don't realize you need saving you will never grab the buoy that has been thrown out to you. You will drown.

What is Sin?

Now before we dive into what the text is teaching us about sin. Let me first offer a definition of what sin is. The most common word for sin in the NT is the word *hamartia* and it basically means to miss the mark of the target that is set before you. It is archery imagery. The target your life is to aim for is God but instead you aim your arrow toward something else, which is usually you, and you miss the target you were meant for. This miss results in alienation and when you alienated from God you are dead.

Another word for sin in the NT is %%% and it means to transgress. To transgress is to cross a line or boundary that you are not supposed to cross. God has set up proper boundaries for our lives. A good example of this is the Ten Commandments and when we break them we go over a boundary that we were not meant to cross. The reason why God sets boundaries for us is not because he is mean but because he knows what is best for us. The boundaries are there to protect us and draw us close to him but when we break them we put ourselves in danger and we fall far from God.

One final thing that is very important to understand about sin is that it is not just an action that you do or don't do. Sin is not just an act of adultery, stealing, or murder (*what we call sins of commission, doing evil*), or failing to read God's Word or help the blind person walk across the street (*what we call sins of omission, failing to do well*), sin is also a condition. The reason your thoughts, words, and deeds lead you to do sins of commission and omission is because you have a sinful condition.

That is to say that you have come into this world as damaged goods. You are not a brand new car. You are a leaky old jalopy.

You've heard the old saying God doesn't make junk or God doesn't make mistakes. While that is true, since we have all been created in the image of God, it does not negate the fact that we have all been affected by the fall of Adam into sin. This doctrine is commonly known as original sin and it simply means that there is something wrong with all of us; there always has been (Ps. 51) and there always will be (Rom 7) until we die and go to be with the Lord.

Only when we die, if we die in Christ, will God finally heal us of all of our infirmities whatever they may be- physical, mental, social, or spiritual. When we come to Christ God begins that process of healing in our lives in the here and now, but it is not completed until we die. Paul says in Romans 8 that the whole creation is groaning in labor pains as it awaits her redemption.

Making Plain the Text (Explication)- Having It Our Way and The Downward Spiral

Now let us look at our text.

Paul begins the gospel by stating that the wrath of God is falling upon the Gentiles because of their godlessness and wickedness. Their godlessness is chiefly rooted in the sin of idolatry. **“They have exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal men and birds and animals and reptiles. They are guilty of worshipping created things rather than the Creator.”** The created things they are worshipping are not just the statutes of men and animals made by human hands but they are also worshipping the human body through their enslavement to sexual sin. Paul speaks of their false worship of the human body through their sexual acts as a degrading of the human body.

So the sin of the Gentiles starts with worshipping images/statutes of false gods; something that seems strange to us because we typically don't do that. Yet it may not be so strange because have plenty of idols in our culture, even if we are not praying to them. Calvin says the human heart is an idol factory. Our idol could be sex, money, power, fame, politics, work, material possessions, sports, a hobby, the computer or the TV, or social media. The list could go on and on. None-the less, this is how the sin of the Gentiles begins.

Because of this God judges the Gentiles and the chief way he does it is not by striking them down with lightening. Forms of judgment *in this life* such as the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah or the flooding of the world are the exceptions when it comes to the judgment of God. The normative and chief way God judges humanity is he simply lets them go, he turns them over to their desires, he lets them have it their way (Burger King), and by doing that humanity ends up reaping what she has sown. When God gives us up to our sinful desires we begin a downward spiral into depravity. This is what happened to the Gentiles.

The text says that first **“God gave them up to the lusts of their heart and to sexual impurity and the degrading of their bodies with one another.”** But then it spirals down to God giving them over to not just the lusts of their hearts but to **“shameful lusts- with both men and women exchanging natural relations with one another for sexual relationships with people of the same sex.”**

I am going to stop here and weigh in on this portion of the text. And I will be brief because this is not a topical sermon on the subject of homosexuality. And as I make my comments here I don't want to err on the extremes in dealing with this text. One extreme, the more liberal one, is to make light of this text or dismiss it by saying it is wrong or it that it does not mean what we think it means. The other extreme would be the more fundamentalist approach that would make so much of this particular portion of Paul's words that it fails to understand his main wider point of idolatry as well as failing to see the other sins in the text that Paul speaks of.

The first thing I will say is that I will not apologize for this text. I know it is unpopular. I also know that having the same beliefs as the one Paul espouses is having negative consequences in our society on those who believe it. People are beginning to lose their jobs and businesses if they have a view that agrees with this text. Academic and intellectual freedom is also increasingly under attack for those who hold to such views as the one Paul espouses in the text. None the less, I will not back down from this text.

Second, I believe this text to be true and I hold to the sexual ethic that the Bible teaches. God made us male and female. We are different and our different bodies, minds, and spirits coming together in the sexual union of a male and female in the context of marriage reflects the wholeness of the image of God that is made complete in the male and female union. The male and female body fit together and have the potential to bring life into the world. There is safety in the male and female sexual union. Men and women temper one another's strengths and strengthen one another's weaknesses. God's plan for human sexuality is in the bonds of marriage between a man and woman. That is the way it was at creation. All other forms of sexual intercourse, whether it be adulterous sex, premarital promiscuous sex, polygamous sex, incestuous sex, or homosexual sex, all occur after the fall of humanity into sin. The standard that God set at creation is one man and one woman together in marriage. First they leave their mother and father, then they cleave to one another in marriage, and then they become one flesh in the sexual union. This is the standard and it is the one Jesus upheld in the gospels.

Third, this is a very sensitive subject right now in our culture and it is one that needs to be handled with great pastoral sensitivity in terms of how we relate to those who have same sex attractions. That I am not getting into in this message. I will simply say that God's grace and compassion needs to be given to those who have same sex attractions. Also, the church ought not to be scared of people who identify as gay. We as a church need to draw close to all kinds people who have all kinds of struggles, including those who have same sex attraction. The gospel is for all people.

Finally, we are all sinners. Not only that, we are all sexual sinners. All humans are broken sexually, it's just a matter of how they are broken and to what degree they are broken and what Paul is saying in this text about homosexuality is just one away in which our brokenness manifests itself in the world. In fact, this particular sin is not even the worst one in the text because the spiral goes down even further.

In verse 28 Paul speaks of the gentiles being given over to a depraved mind, to do things that ought not to be done. As a consequence the gentiles became **"filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity, which led to murder, strife, deceit malice, gossip, slander, arrogance,**

and pride.” It got so bad that people started inventing ways to do evil. **“They became faithless, heartless, senseless, haters of their parents, and though they knew it was wrong, they not only continued to do such things, but they even applauded and approved those who did them.”** That’s the bottom of the barrel. It’s one thing to do something wicked. It’s another thing to stand on the side and cheer someone along as they do it.

So this is what happens when God in his judgment gives us up and lets us go. We spiral down into a path of ever increasing depravity. It is a fearful thing whenever this happens in the life of a person, or a nation, or even a church. If God lets go of us to have it our own way we are in trouble.

Is God Just to Do This?

The question that is always before us anytime we talk the judgment of God is, is it just? Is God right do that? As it concerned the Gentiles, Paul answers this question early in God’s case against the Gentiles. Look at what he said in v. 19-20 of the text. In v.18 Paul talks about **“the wrath of God being revealed from heaven”** against those who do wicked things (remember, the wrath is the letting go of people so they can do their thing) and the reason God is doing that is because what can be known about God has been made plain to them because God made it plain to them. **“For ever since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities- his eternal power and divine nature-have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made so that men are without excuse.”**

Basically what Paul is saying there is that when a person dies and faces God on Judgment Day he cannot plead ignorance. He cannot say I did not know my idolatry is wicked because you did not tell me. This is an important point because the Gentiles were not the recipients of the written law. The Jews were and they knew, but so did the Gentiles. How did the Gentiles know? They knew, even though they did not have the written law, because God gave them ample revelation in their inner conscience and in the outer witness of creation itself.

Theologically we call this natural revelation. Natural revelation is simply the witness of God in creation and in the human conscience. Special revelation is God’s revelation in His Word, which is what the Jews got and it is what we got. We got a lots of special relation because we have more Bibles than anybody, but even if you did get special revelation you still got natural revelation and the natural revelation is enough to render you without excuse on the Day of Judgment. So is God just in his wrath? The answer is yes because even if you got just a little bit of revelation it is certainly enough for you to know that you ought not to be plunging yourself head first into idolatry. You know should be worshipping the Creator and not the things that have been created.

Conclusion

So this is how Paul begins his gospel. It is a real downer but it is true and it is important that we get this because it helps us to understand not just the world and why it is the way it is, but also ourselves and why we are the way we are. It also helps us understand that God is perfectly just to deal with sinners as Paul says God deals with sinners in this text, and most importantly it will soon help us to understand how good the good news really is.

God in Jesus Christ has given us the way to be rescued and renewed from our depravity and His judgment but that will come later in Romans because first we must understand the bad news before we can understand how good the good news of Jesus really is.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.

Key Concepts

Moral relativism- There is no things such as objective truth or objective right and wrong. The individual gets to determine for himself what is right and wrong.

Sin-

- To “miss the mark.” The target is God but we aim for something else. Archery imagery
- To transgress, to cross boundaries not meant to be crossed
- Sin is a “condition” we all have. We are broken from the get go, damaged goods. We are leaky jalopies, not brand new cars.
- The sin of idolatry is worshipping created things and not the Creator.

The judgment of God-

- In this life on earth God’s normal way of judgment is simply to “let us go” and “have it our way.” This leads to us reaping what we sow. This form of judgment plunges humanity on a downward path of depravity
- Natural revelation- the idea that **no** person can claim on Judgment Day that he did not know that what he was doing was wrong because God never told him it was wrong. God puts inside the human conscience of every person an inward sense that there is a Creator who ought to be worshipped and obeyed, as opposed to worshipping things created by the Creator. Also, the creation itself testifies to a Creator who is greater than the creation, and who ought to be worshipped and obeyed. God also puts inside the conscience of every man some general sense of what is right and what is wrong. Therefore when God judges us we are without excuse (even if we did not have the Bible). We are **not** ignorant; therefore God is not unjust to judge us. We know better.