

### THE BOOK OF ROMANS

#### Lesson 5, chapter 1 conclusion

We have spent an inordinate amount of time in chapter 1 of Romans, but today we'll conclude it. In some ways today might be the most emotionally and culturally challenging of the several lessons we've had on this chapter because Paul, never one to mince words, deals head-on with sin and especially with sexual perversion. And I believe that sexual perversion and sexual immorality is the single most serious and dominant issue of our time. And this is because while terrorism is a danger to life and limb, sexual immorality is a danger to our souls and to our eternal futures. It is an issue that has not just divided the world and our nation; it has divided and deeply damaged the Church. In an astounding turn away from God and His commandments, some of the longest standing and most recognized Christian denominations have recently split over the issue of sexual immorality.

I want to begin by quoting a portion of a Psalm that is quite poignant and pertinent to our lesson today.

#### **Psalm 50:16-23 CJB**

***<sup>16</sup> But to the wicked God says: "What right do you have to proclaim my laws or take my covenant on your lips, <sup>17</sup> when you so hate to receive instruction and fling my words behind you?"***

***<sup>18</sup> When you see a thief, you join up with him, you throw in your lot with adulterers,***

***<sup>19</sup> you give your mouth free rein for evil and harness your tongue to deceit;***

***<sup>20</sup> you sit and speak against your kinsman, you slander your own mother's son.***

***<sup>21</sup> When you do such things, should I stay silent? You may have thought I was just like you; but I will rebuke and indict you to your face.***

***<sup>22</sup> Consider this, you who forget God, or I will tear you to pieces, with no one to save you.***

***<sup>23</sup> "Whoever offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice honors me; and to him who goes the right way I will show the salvation of God."***

What right, this Psalm asks, does anyone have to depend on God's covenants, when we hate to receive God's instructions and "flings (God's) words behind you"? Let me say that in modern terms: you say you have been saved in the name of Jesus Christ, but you don't want

to obey God's laws or comply with the truth of the Bible. It is the person who **does** right that God says He will guide to salvation. How do we know what right is if we shun God's Word, and turn our backs on His Torah where right and wrong are clearly defined in as many as 600 case examples of human activity?

In a sense what we are about to hear Paul say is a Jewish Midrash, or a sermon if you like, on this Psalm. He probably had this passage of Scripture in mind when he penned this portion of the Book of Romans.

Open your Bibles to Romans chapter 1.

### **RE-READ ROMANS CHAPTER 1:18 – end**

Let me give you Paul's bottom line to this portion of Romans chapter 1: it is that the man who rebels against God, and denies his dependence upon God and His commandments, inevitably becomes subject to a process of moral degeneration. Often this moral degeneration is not something that the man realizes is happening. And equally as often it is because his or her degenerative condition looks to be healthy and fully in tune with self-satisfied local society and a government that believes that it is the source of moral truth. In other words, all looks fine and well to the degenerating man because everybody else is doing the same thing and looks the same way.

Please also notice that Paul is not speaking only to gentiles or only to Jews; rather it is a general statement that relates to all humanity in general, and yet since his letter is specifically to the Believers in Rome apparently some of them may be caught up in this moral degeneration. So he is not picking out any particular group to rail against; this applies to everyone (especially the Believing community) in light of the Gospel message.

And in another sense, what we see is that in verse 18 when Paul speaks of God's anger against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, later towards the end of this chapter Paul defines what godlessness and wickedness looks like and that people have no one else to blame for their degenerative moral condition than themselves. Many decades ago a comedian named Flip Wilson often used a famous line in his skits: "the Devil made me do it". And while it was always funny, it seems that many Christians indeed believe that their own bad behavior or the wickedness of others is the result of Satan's activity in their lives. Paul makes no such claim, and neither does the Bible in general. The Devil may tempt, but he does not have the power to coerce action. Humans willingly do evil. And so this entire section of Romans chapter 1 places the responsibility for godlessness and wickedness not upon Satan, but rather directly upon the shoulders of each sinner.

Although we lightly touched on it last time, I want to repeat that from Paul's viewpoint no one can plead that they did not know they were rebelling against God because what needs to be known about God that they might do right in His eyes is revealed in God's Creation. Let me say that using a different term. God's attributes are revealed in nature (assuming we understand that nature is everything that is visible and tangible and that is the result of God's Creative force). There has been much debate over just what Paul means by this and whether

such a thought is even reasonable. After all, how can some isolated tribe in the middle of the Amazon jungle be expected to know God? But without doubt this not some new doctrine that Paul has come up with; Judaism in general in his day believed the same way because it was a basic tenet of the Hebrew Bible. Some refer to this as natural law, and that is an appropriate label. A good example of this is found in Psalm 19.

### **Psalm 19:1-5 CJB**

<sup>CJB</sup> **Psalm 19:1** *For the leader. A psalm of David:*

<sup>2</sup> ***The heavens declare the glory of God, the dome of the sky speaks the work of his hands.***

<sup>3</sup> ***Every day it utters speech, every night it reveals knowledge.***

<sup>4</sup> ***Without speech, without a word, without their voices being heard,***

<sup>5</sup> ***their line goes out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.***

So God has acted in way that only He could in order to disclose Himself; and this disclosure is the Creation. In fact the Creation....the earth, the sky, the Universe, and humanity..... Nature...so closely resembles God's attributes that it is possible to say that Creation is like a shadow of God passing by. Are we not told in Genesis 1:27 that God made mankind in His image? Man is of God's Creation, and so we are an image (a shadow) of Him. But the shadow itself is not the Creator; the shadow is merely the result of the existence and presence of the Creator. A shadow can never generate itself and cannot exist by itself. A shadow has no life of itself; whatever life it seems to have is actually contained in the creator of the shadow. And because this is true, God had to breathe life from Himself into the human shadow, Adam, after He formed him.

Therefore Paul can say with confidence that all humans have an innate understanding not only of God's existence but of His basic attributes because they can be seen in nature itself. How often I look into the night sky and stand awestruck at the infinite nature of it, and at the variation and extent of the black ether and those millions of pinpoints of light. Even more often I'll pause to gaze out of my office window at the glorious blue of the water, and the stunning greens of the plants and trees, and wonder at how beautiful it is and yet can a creation be more beautiful and magnificent than its Creator? Never! And yet, ironically, when humanity depends solely upon taking our cues from nature as concerns God we get bad results. We are supposed to worship and glorify God. Instead we can wind up worshipping the created things...things such as nature.... instead of the Creator. Essentially humans, because of our evil inclinations that began in the Garden of Eden with the fall of Adam and Eve, are wired to reject a true knowledge of God and turn instead to gods of our own making. This is the human dilemma and the only cure for it is the Gospel of Christ.

But then verse 21 explains that it is the refusal of humans to recognize God for who He is and to worship Him as such that leads to them becoming futile in their thinking and having their

hearts darkened.

We need to be aware that when Paul speaks of “knowing God” from nature that he means it in a very limited sense. From nature people can have an awareness of God but never establish a personal relationship with Him. Instead of seeking God and acknowledging God “as God”, humanity instead tends to turn to idols; items of our own creation. In Greek thought to “know God” more meant to apprehend and perceive Him as He really is; it is a desire for intellectual knowledge. But in Hebrew thought to “know God” more means to actively acknowledge Him by worshipping and glorifying Him in a personal way. Thus we see the shining evidence of Paul’s Hebrew thought patterns especially apparent in his explanation of what knowing God amounts to and how it ought to manifest itself among humans as praise and worship. So those who think that knowing God is primarily an intellectual exercise have actually become futile in their thinking; even though they are so enamored with what they believe are their wise thoughts, in fact they are fools. The result of their foolishness is that they become self-deceived and begin to exchange the authentic for the fake. In all their supposed wisdom they choose to give glory to other human beings, or to birds, animals and reptiles. And usually this is done using images....idols....of humans, birds, animals and reptiles.

This idea of the wicked exchanging the worshipping of the true God for worshipping fakes.....images of created things..... is a frequent Old Testament subject. An example is Psalm 106 when the subject is the Golden Calf created by the Israelites during their exodus from Egypt:

### ***Psalm 106:19-20 CJB***

***<sup>19</sup> In Horev they fashioned a calf, they worshipped a cast metal image.***

***<sup>20</sup> Thus they exchanged their Glory for the image of an ox that eats grass!***

So to sum it up: Paul is saying that a human who refuses to acknowledge the God of Israel as the true God and Creator does so because they choose to do so. They do it from their own wickedness, and they have utterly no excuse for it because despite what they might say or do, they innately know of the true God. While atheism was not known until barely 300 years ago, in fact while atheists swear up and down that they don’t worship any god at all, the fact that they celebrate themselves as the highest being in existence, the most superior of all living things, belies the truth that they are worshipping themselves. That they don’t want anyone else displaying any evidence of God is because it pricks their conscience when they see it and they prefer to stay safely ensconced in their make-believe, self-made world. The religion of atheism is a worship of self. Even more, our so-called brilliant scientists who insist that the creation of the Universe and of life was spontaneous and self-produced are in modern times the fulfillment of Paul’s words about those “claiming to be wise, they have become fools”. While Paul would never have imagined of people who don’t believe in gods and in the spirit world (no such people existed in his day), in fact the application couldn’t be more spot on.

But now we enter that portion of Romans chapter 1 that has been all but rejected by some denominations, Pastors, and a large and growing number of congregation members. It is that

portion that I believe is perhaps the most important, dangerous and bedeviling of the modern era. The portion that deals with homosexuality and other forms of sexual perversion and severely denounces it. But before we deal with that, verse 24 says something important and controversial.

First, verse 24 explains that the reason that at some point God will turn people over to their sins. He does this because they have no excuse. Everything from verses 18 – 23 has set the stage for verse 24. Second, we have to face what it means by “God has given them up”. Some English versions say abandoned, others say turned them over, and yet others say delivered them. These all translate the Greek word *paradidomi* and each one of these English translations fits well with the literal meaning of this word, so there is no need to quibble. What is being said is that God abandoned people to their moral degeneration and wickedness as a result of their intentional rejection of Him. But what does abandon or hand over mean? Does God just sort of let go and allow whatever is going to happen to happen (a rather passive action)? Or is He more active in the process? When we look in the Old Testament to where this same term “handed over” is used we find that often it speaks of Israel when they are in rebellion, and it is not simply that God suddenly merely turns his back on Israel and stops blessing them, but rather that He also gives them a nudge towards their enemies and their deserved punishment. It is like a judge who convicts a criminal and then hands him over to the jailor for incarceration.

What has God given these wicked people who reject Him over to? What is their earthly punishment? It is to be turned over to the morally depraved lusts of their hearts. Remember: when the term heart is used in Holy Scripture, it is referring to the seat of intellect, the human mind (which during the entire Biblical era was believed to occur in the heart organ). What Paul is expressing here is a well understood Jewish principle from 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Judaism. It is that a man must serve either His Creator or serve his own evil inclination. That is, a human will always choose either to serve and obey God, or to serve and obey our self. There is no 3<sup>rd</sup> way and no middle ground. Yeshua accepted and taught this same principle that both the Pharisees and the Essenes agreed upon:

**CJB Matthew 6:24** *No one can be a slave to two masters; for he will either hate the first and love the second, or scorn the second and be loyal to the first. You can't be a slave to both God and money.*

The Rabbis taught that either your heart controls you, or you control your heart. That is your heart either brings you under subjection, or you bring your heart under subjection with the idea being that when your heart (your mind) controls you, then God cannot. Why did the Rabbis say that a righteous person must bring their hearts into subjection? Because in Holy Scripture God taught them that:

**CJB Jeremiah 17:9** *"The heart is more deceitful than anything else and mortally sick. Who can fathom it?"*

In the Jewish Midrash called Genesis Rabbah 34 we read this commentary about Genesis 8:21: “AND THE LORD SAID TO HIS HEART (Gen. 8:21).” The wicked stand in subjection

to their hearts (their passions and lusts). Thus it says (in God's Word that) **THE FOOL HAS SAID IN HIS HEART** (Ps. 14:1), **AND ESAU SAID IN HIS HEART** (Gen. 27:41), **AND JEROBOAM SAID IN HIS HEART** (1Kings 12:26), **NOW HAMAN SAID IN HIS HEART** (Est. 6:6). But the righteous have their hearts under their control. Hence it is written: **NOW HANNAH, SHE SPOKE AT HER HEART** (1Sam. 1:13), **AND DAVID SAID TO HIS HEART** (1Sam.27:1), **BUT DANIEL PURPOSED TO HIS HEART** (Dan. 1:8), **AND THE LORD SAID TO HIS HEART** (Gen.34:10).

So we must never listen to our heart and let our heart control us; rather we must bring our hearts (our minds) under subjection. Subjection to what? To our regenerated mind that has been healed by God's Word, God's truth, and God's light. The Bible warns against listening to our heart time and time again. And yet Christians, especially, often talk about how they follow their hearts or that their heart is telling them to do something and they think this is a good thing. The Holy Scriptures tell us the opposite.

The final words of verse 24 speak of the shameful misuse of each other's bodies. Obviously this is speaking of sexual perversion; but the next few verses make it clear that the particular sexual perversion that Paul is addressing is homosexuality. It is not my intention to make the bulk of this lesson about the details and evils of homosexuality; the Bible itself ought to be sufficient enough to address it. That non-Believers enjoy and advocate for homosexuality and other sexually immoral outrages should not be surprising to us. They have no relationship with God, and therefore no moral compass or Holy Spirit to guide them. But what about professed Believers?

So what I do want to address is the ever increasing bent of the Christian Church to accept homosexuality as a good and acceptable alternative lifestyle. We have a number of Church denominations and Jewish sects who now ordain gay ministers; other denominations have decided to perform gay marriages. I don't want to just throw that out there without specifics. The Conservative Jewish Movement, the Reform Jewish Movement, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church USA, and the United Church of Christ have all made it Church or synagogue law to accept homosexuality as normal and good. They all ordain Gay leaders and perform same-sex marriages.

The common refrain from these Churches and synagogues is that either the Bible is silent on the subject of homosexuality, or that such a prohibition no longer applies as it was only meant for ancient times (even if the prohibition is presented in the New Testament like here in Romans 1). The other primary argument is that because God is love, love trumps everything; so if love is involved sexual relations in any form (including among the same sex) it is good and Jesus heartily approves of it and condemns those who speak against it as unrepentant bigots.

Here is a recent statement made by one of the leaders of the Christian LGBT movement, Jimmy Creech, a 30 year United Methodist pastor. While he certainly doesn't speak for all Gay people who also claim Christianity, he speaks for a large group.

***How do I view God's position on "homosexuality?" I believe lesbian, gay and bisexual people to be a part of God's wondrous creation, created to be just who they are, and***

***completely loved and treasured by God. I believe God does not intend for any one to be alone but to live in companionship. And I believe God expects healthy loving relationships to include sexual love. The Bible doesn't say this, of course. But neither does it deny it. I believe this to be true not only because of the Bible's emphasis on the goodness of God's creation and the supreme value of love, but because of the greater understanding of human nature that we have available to us today. I do not believe that God intends us to live in the small world of ancient biblical culture, but rather in God's larger evolving world informed by science, reason and experience.***

The other argument that passes for truth in our time is that this bent against homosexuality is only a modern one and that what the Bible meant to ancient people in this Romans passage and in at least 5 other passages in the Old and New Testaments that are frequently quoted as anti-gay, actually have nothing to do with homosexual behavior.

To that end I'd like to quote to you a passage from a commentary on the Book of Romans written by the early Church Father Severian of Gabala about 400 A.D. This regards the specific passage of Romans 1:27 that reads like this:

***<sup>CJB</sup> Romans 1:27 and likewise the men, giving up natural relations with the opposite sex, burn with passion for one another, men committing shameful acts with other men and receiving in their own persons the penalty appropriate to their perversion.***

Severian says this: ***Paul did not say this lightly, but because he had heard that there was a homosexual community at Rome.***

In the Greco-Roman world of the New Testament, homosexuality was not only common it was fully accepted, even highly regarded. We get the modern term Lesbian from the notorious reputations of the homosexual women of the Isle of Lesbos. So as Severian says, Paul wasn't writing to the Romans about this because the thought just came to his mind. As the center of the Roman Empire, the city of Rome was ground-zero for sexual immorality and especially homosexuality. Rome's emperors were noted for it, and Nero turned it into an art form using the bodies of young boys. So Paul was addressing a specific problem that Believers in Rome were facing (this was his protocol for all of his letters that we today call Epistles).

Another early Church Father, Chrysostom, who lived at the same time as Severian, says this as taken from his famous Homilies on Romans: ***This is clear proof of the ultimate degree of corruption, when both sexes are abandoned.....Notice how deliberate Paul measures his words. For he does not say that they were enamored of one another but that they were consumed with lust for one another.....The normal desire for sexual intercourse united the sexes to one another, but by taking this away and turning it into something else, the devil divided the sexes from each other and forced what was one to become two, in opposition to the laws of God.....The devil was bent on destroying the human race.....Paul goes straight to the source of sexual evil: ungodliness which comes from twisted teaching, and lawlessness which is its reward.***

So, first of all, the comments of these 2 Early Church Fathers is proof that the claim that it is

only fairly recently that the Church began to say that homosexuality was wrong and to suggest that the Bible does not speak against it is simply a lie. But second I think that the last sentence that I read to you from Chrysostom nails it: the real source of sexual evil is ungodliness which comes from twisted teaching and lawlessness.

What concerns me is not only that entire denominations have given in to the LGBT movement, but other denominations are teetering, or at least finding ways to be very tolerant of Gays and Transgenders. Pope Francis has recently issued an open apology to Gays and Transgenders for not inviting them into the Catholic Church and more fully embracing them and their sexual choices. How could the leader of the Catholic Church declare such a thing? By twisting God's Word and by being disobedient to God's laws (by being lawless).

What these passages in Romans chapter 1 tell us is that when people move far enough away from God (and I don't know exactly where that line is) He will turn them over to their sin. And he tells us that idolatry and sexual perversion go hand in glove. So in verse 28 Paul more or less repeats the previous few verses, using a little different terms to make his point. And the point that jumps out is that those who do not find God worth knowing will be given up to their worthless ways of thinking. And it is God's intention that the result will be doing the following laundry list of wrong things (vices). In a sense, the punishment is that God ceases restraining the individual from committing all manner of sexual perversion and becoming even more wicked by doing this list of vices.

I will tell you that many Bible commentators have a very difficult time with this section of Romans because they don't like what it implies. They worry that this will sound too harsh and turn off Seekers. They worry that this puts a chink in their thoughts that the New Testament God, Jesus, is supposed to be strictly a God of love and mercy but this certainly doesn't sound very compassionate or tolerant. They worry that it sounds too judgmental and too permanent. But folks, it says what it says; there's no candy coating it.

Verse 32 states that all these vices listed make the sinner worthy of death. Understand that from the Jewish perspective this not only means capital punishment but it means eternal separation from God. For under the Law of Moses, which Paul still upholds, that is what it means. The Law is that if you have committed a sin that can be atoned for, then an animal sacrifice will do. But if you commit a sin that cannot be atoned for by an animal sacrifice, then no atonement of any kind whatsoever is possible. Your eternal fate is sealed; you die an unrighteous death and Hell is your eternal home. Now that Yeshua has come and gone Paul certainly understands that a person's sins can be forgiven by faith and trust in Yeshua. But that is not the point or the subject, here.

Make no mistake; there is not a hint in Paul's statement that a person could live the lifestyle of any of these vices and then simultaneously legitimately claim trust in Yeshua. In fact what Paul has described is a person with a reprobate mind who has chosen NOT to know God, and as a result God has given them over to sexual perversion as well as these other sins. So this modern day thought in some Christian circles that a person can enthusiastically live a homosexual lifestyle at the same time claiming Christianity is simply self-deception.



### Matthew 7:21-23 CJB

<sup>21</sup> ***"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, only those who do what my Father in heaven wants.***

<sup>22</sup> ***On that Day, many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord! Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we expel demons in your name? Didn't we perform many miracles in your name?'***

<sup>23</sup> ***Then I will tell them to their faces, 'I never knew you! Get away from me, you workers of lawlessness!'***

Verse 32 also makes a simple claim that we need to not overlook. It is that people who do all these wrongs that Paul has spoken about know they are doing wrong. They don't have to be told that sexual perversion is wrong; nature itself tells us. They don't have to be told that slander, dishonesty, or planning evil schemes is wrong; knowing this is built into our DNA as humans created by a Creator God. Murderers don't murder because they don't know murder is wrong. Thieves don't steal because they think stealing is right. Adulterers don't practice adultery because they think it's good. And homosexuals don't practice same-sex sexual relations because they believe it is God's will for them. They do these things because they want to do them; because they listen to their hearts and want to fulfill their fleshly desires. They rationalize their wrong behavior because they have willfully exchanged truth for a lie, says Paul.

Paul ends this section of Romans by saying something else that has troubled theologians to no end. He says that to applaud others who do these heinous deeds is no different than doing them yourself. So in the case of sexual perversion, if you are not a Gay or Transgender but you applaud and cheer them on in their destructive sin, you are counted as alongside them. I have read some pretty tortured attempts to make these few words out to be something else entirely; but they are not convincing.

While I must say that it is not an easy principle to understand why a person who only applauds and cheers others to do wrong is as guilty as the one who does the wrong, there is no other way to understand this saying of Paul. So as Believers it leaves us with only one option: accept it and understand that it is true even if it is a difficult truth especially in modern Western society and so our minds are uncomfortable with it. It is not up to us to put God's Word on trial; it is for us to learn from it, believe it, and obey it.

Next week we'll begin Romans chapter 2.