



Sermon Growth Guide

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Upside Down, Inside Out | Romans 1:21-32

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Key Verse: "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile, and their foolish hearts were darkened." - Romans 1:21

Big Idea: When we worship ourselves rather than God, our worlds – personal and corporate – fall into chaos and decay.

Foundations

Paul is solely focused on the gospel of Jesus Christ, but this good news is not just one approach to life among many equal alternatives. It is the only saving power and it's available in Jesus. If it is good news, however, then people must have been waiting to hear some good news. That means there is also bad news that needs to be answered.

This passage describes in great detail what the bad news is. It is the destruction that is a consequence of ignoring or rejecting God.

John Henry Newman in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* writes: ...the human race is implicated in some terrible aboriginal calamity. It is out of joint with the purposes of its Creator.

Paul is clear that the consequence of ignoring or disobeying God is to feel what happens to us when we go our own way. God "gives us over" to our desires. We live for ourselves and so does everyone else. That is a recipe for conflict, chaos and death. It is also, however, a lesson in our need for God...for the power of the Holy Spirit to restrain evil and to help us understand our need for good news – a Savior.

We are captive to our own desires, and we know it. Only the good news, the gospel of Jesus can break those chains.

Understanding God's Word

Read the extended text – Romans 1:18-32. We are told that by just looking at creation we can know something of God and yet still ignore or deny Him. According to Paul, that leads to humanity's degradation, which begins with ingratitude (verse 21). Why do you think ingratitude is the beginning of humanity's descent?

Applying God's Word

Verse 21 says that rejection of God affects our thinking, i.e., our thinking becomes futile. For Paul, that is not just muddled thinking. It is also moral refusal of God's invitation and commands. When you think about verses 18-32 and relate them the Greatest Commandment (Mark 12: 29-31), how can we avoid the kind of thinking that turns everything Upside Down and Inside Out?

Witnessing God's Word

The words of this passage are gravely harsh and have often led Christians to be judgmental of those who engage in the sins described. But these sins are symptoms of a deeper, deadly condition – a lifetime apart from God. As well, we are also guilty, so our challenge is to relate to others as Jesus relates to us. As you have engaged this topic, in what ways do you think you need to change attitudes and approaches to others?

Having introduced himself to the Roman church and explained the gospel of Jesus Christ, Paul now turns to illustrate in great detail the perils of Greco-Roman society. Having made the case for salvation, he now digs deep into the dangers of refusing God. When we fail to respond to God's self-revelation with worship and honor due to him, we turn to glorifying and worshipping the things of this world. God allows us to experience the consequences of this in all its horrible confusion. We worship created things instead of the Creator, and it turns us Upside Down and Inside Out. I will explain that in a bit.

But first, I suspect one part of this passage stood out to you as I read. I could feel it. It made us all shift awkwardly in our seats. The part about sexuality. Paul names homosexual behavior as an illustration of what it may look like when we deny God and set ourselves up in his place, when we exchange our worship of God for worship of self. Homosexuality is a complicated phenomenon and must be addressed with deep empathy and love. Most people I know who have same sex attraction would not say they are aware of a moment when they made such an exchange. There wasn't a moment when they exchanged honor to God for personal pleasure. The folks I know are trying with all their heart to honor God, to hold on to Jesus and keep trusting Jesus is holding on to them, as they navigate finding themselves in the middle of a story they never wanted to be in. What these brothers and sisters need is understanding and compassion, not the superiority and judgmental self-righteousness we often derive from passages like this. But they also need, we also need, the truth. I remember one same-sex attracted friend saying to me, "Tim, I can't tell to you what it does to my heart, after I have spent my whole life struggling with this and finding the joys and pains of keeping faithful to Christ in singleness and community, to have some Christian leader stand up and say it isn't true. God is good with whatever." We need the truth.

There is nowhere in Scripture where homosexual activity is blessed by God. Intimate physical activity is blessed by God in one place, within the bounds of marriage between one man and one woman. That doesn't shift from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation. It is important, living as we are in the back wash of the Sexual Revolution, to remember that we have the Word of God, the truth of Scripture. "So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:27) When Jesus was asked about marriage he returned to Genesis. "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh' ?" (Matthew 19:4-5) This is part of what caused our church to separate from the mainline presbyterian church. If what God defines as sin (that is, sexual activity outside of marriage or between two people of the same sex) if sin can be done away with by a majority vote of a church, if a council can remove sin, that is an alternative gospel, a false gospel, an alternative theory of atonement. Why then did Christ die on the cross? A vote would have been easier. The false gospel empties the cross of its power. We need the truth as much as we need the grace. All of us. There is nowhere in Scripture where homosexual activity is blessed by God, but every page of Scripture is a promise that every person can be blessed by God even in our sinfulness.

That issue stands out to us, but it wasn't Paul's main theme. The main theme is worship. Where is your worship directed? "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." (Romans 1:21) God is making himself known. God can be seen in glimpses in creation. God breaks into our lives. And for many, the response, the response to God's love, is ingratitude and apathy. "They neither glorified him," that's

apathy; they didn't worship, they didn't give him any weight, "nor gave thanks to him." All that we are and all that we have come from the hand of God, yet we live as though God doesn't even exist. That's how we suppress the truth. "Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools." (Romans 1:22) How? By worshipping idols. Idolatry. There is nothing so foolish as thinking an inanimate object, a statue of wood or stone, is a god who will help you and respond to you if you make the right sacrifice to it or say the right magic words. But we do it all the time. We do it. Not them, us! We worship made things rather than the Maker of all things.

Paul is talking about the people of Rome, people outside the church. It's the most powerful nation the world has ever seen, but its people are corrupt. Why? That's what Paul is explaining here. It is because they suppressed the knowledge of God they had. They exchanged glory to God for glory to created things. So, Paul repeats, "God gave them over." Verses 24, 26, and 28. "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another." (Romans 1:24) Imagine a loving and kind husband whose wife is bent on infidelity. She keeps running off with an abusive man who treats her poorly. She comes back to her true husband again and again, but eventually he gives her over. "If that's what you want, then go." That's the image here. "Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done." (Romans 1:28) Yes, homosexual activity is one example, but it goes on and on. Every manner of selfish evil is listed. Being heterosexual is no free pass here.

"They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful;

they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents." (Romans 1:29-30) J. B. Philips has it, "They became whisperers-behind-doors, stabbers-in-the-back... they overflowed with insolent pride and boastfulness, and their minds teemed with diabolical invention." "They have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them." (Romans 1:31-32) Well done, they tell one another. Keep going. Be proud. Well, we don't want to be that do we? I don't. So how did it happen? Paul's description of the perils of Graeco-Roman society all stem from one source, one thing: knowing God—at least in general revelation, natural revelation, what is revealed of God through nature and creation—knowing God they did not worship God. They wanted to be their own gods instead. Dear church, this is the root of all sin, and it also reveals the cure.

A church father named Gregory of Nyssa was fascinated with how the soul reacts to worship, what it does to us when we capture a glimpse of God's beauty and we give him glory. He said the soul is like a mirror. A mirror takes on the image of what is before it. If you put gold in front of it, it reflects the gold. If you put something beautiful in front of it, the beauty is doubled. Glass mirrors were kind of fresh technology for him! Okay, we got it. If you put something ugly in front of it, it doubles the ugliness. What if God's eternal glory is in front of the mirror of your soul? You know how when you put two mirrors facing each other, it goes on and on forever? What if your soul could gaze upon eternal, infinity beauty? "If gold is held up to the mirror, the mirror assumes the appearance of gold and reflects the splendor of gold's substance. If anything abominable is held up, its ugliness is impressed on the mirror... Thus the mirror represents in its own being whatever is placed before it. So too the soul, when cleansed by the Word from vice,

it receives within itself the sun's orb and shines with this reflected light." (Gregory of Nyssa) If your soul is a mirror, where is it pointed? "Those who gaze at the true God receive in themselves the properties of the divine nature [but] those who attend to the vanity of idols are changed into what they behold and become stone instead of men." (Gregory of Nyssa)

Okay, hang with me here. The thing the Romans did, the thing we tend to do, is we tend to try to point the mirror of our souls on ourselves. I don't want God to be God; I want to be my own God. What happens then? The mirror goes concave. It bends in on itself. St. Augustine and Martin Luther described sin as being *incurvatus in se*, curved in on oneself. What does a mirror do when it is curved in on itself? Ever looked into a spoon? Upside down, inside out, and backwards. Everything right looks wrong. Everything good looks bad. Everything evil looks healthy and fun. This isn't about some people being sexually right and some being sexually wrong. This is about what happens to all of us when we deny God and put our almighty self at the center. "For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened." (Romans 1:21) "They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator—who is forever praised. Amen." (Romans 1:25) "Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done." (Romans 1:28) The cure? Love God. Love neighbor. Get out of your own gravity.

No Shame: Standing on Gospel Truth. That's our series. We are embarrassed at times by the Christian sexual ethic. Why does it have to be so narrow? Actually, in a world where the powerful used women, children and slaves for pleasure, the emergence of the Christian sexual ethic, intimacy within a commitment of marriage between one

man and one woman, this changed history, changed the game for women and children in an immeasurably positive way. Rebecca McLaughlin spoke at our denomination National Gathering last year. In a book called *Confronting Christianity*, she takes a chapter to argue that the Christian sexual ethic is an opportunity for us to share just how good and helpful and positive God's ways are for all of us. Rebecca, as a young woman in Cambridge, found herself living a story she did not want. She was attracted to other women. She is now married to her husband and raising a family together. I encourage you to know her story. We need not be embarrassed. What God has ordained is good. Very good. Good news for all people. And full, fulfilling, joyful lives can be lived by all people under the ordering of God.

No shame. There is so much shame associated with this area of our lives. Every one of us carries some shame. No shame. How? With ourselves at the center, our souls collapse in. Everything goes upside down and inside out. Look to Jesus. His beauty, his glory. Love God. Love neighbor. It's enough to reshape the eternity reflected in your soul; it's enough to pull your soul back out where it needs to be. Jesus lived a single life. No romance. No wife. A full life. The full life. He took our shame upon himself. That's how big the cross is. All is paid. All is forgiven. No shame. "Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1) No shame. Only forgiveness. Only good news. Can you believe that this morning?