

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor

[Swift Creek Baptist Church.com](http://SwiftCreekBaptistChurch.com), 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

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Romans 1:21-32 “The Terrible Consequences of Rejecting God”

Intro. In this section of Romans Paul is setting out to prove to any reasonable person the guilt of mankind before God. He has a purpose behind what he is doing here. Before a person will seek salvation in Jesus Christ, he must first understand that he is guilty before a holy God, & liable for the judgment of God. We must realize that we have sinned, and thus we lack peace with God & true satisfaction, and we are in danger of spending eternity separated from God.

Have you ever come to the place in *your* life that you knew you were lost, guilty before God? Have you ever experienced the convicting influence of the Holy Spirit, where you felt a great need for a Savior? If not, this message is especially for you.

In chapter 1 Paul is setting forth the obvious guilt of the non-Jewish, pagan world. Paul did not just have in mind the idol worshiper in the jungle, but the cultured Greek and Romans as well. And you can be sure that most of what we read here sounds very much like modern society here in America. America is no longer a Christian nation; it is increasingly becoming a nation similar to the debauchery of the ancient Roman Empire. So what Paul writes here is as up to date as today's newspaper!

As you can tell, the subject that I will deal with today is not pleasant. Going through this passage is similar to an experience that I had a number of times. As I would return home from Bible College in Texas, I would have to pass by the paper mill. It almost always gave off an unpleasant odor. Have you ever smelled a paper mill before? Even though I did not like the smell, I knew that after a few miles I would pass by the stench and then be home. There are some wonderful truths later in Romans, but we must pass by the stench of godlessness and sin first.

So let us begin this terrible, but important journey through the remaining verses of chapter 1. Now the first truth that I want to point out is:

I. THE REALITY OF MAN'S REJECTION OF GOD

John 1:11 indicates that Jesus came into His own world, but His own people rejected Him. Mankind is guilty because mankind as a whole has deliberately rejected God. This rejection of God is often gradual and successive. Often it gets worse from one generation to the next.

In v.21 Paul said, “although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God...” As we discuss in our last message, the creation reveals that there is a God, and it reveals quite a bit about the attributes of God, such as His power and intelligence. Yet by in large, man has rejected God. And in this context Paul indicates several ways that man has rejected God:

A. They Exchange the Truth of God for a Lie – That's what Paul says in v.25. Actually, Paul uses the definite article before “lie,” so it is “the lie.” People often exchange the true God¹ for the devil's lie of false religion. The particular lie that Paul had in mind is given in the last of v.25,

¹ If the clause, “and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” is explanatory of this clause, then “the truth of God” corresponds to “the Creator” and the worship and service of the creature corresponds to “the lie.” In that event “the truth of God” would be equivalent to the true God. On the other hand, this could be an objective genitive, “the truth about God.” If it is a subjective genitive is the truth given from God.

the “worshiped and served the creature rather than² the Creator....” What a paradox! Instead of worshipping & sacrificing [*latreuo*] to the Creator, they worship the creature. This is in many ways a restatement of what he has already said in v.23. There Paul says that they “changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.” They did not acknowledge the true God but made gods in keeping with their baser natures. So you can see that idolatry is the particular form of the lie that Paul is addressing.

There is a clear tendency in sinful man to exchange the truth about God for the lie of a false god. Mankind to this day is guilty of rejecting the truth about God in favor of false religion. If you are worshipping any other god than the One revealed in the Bible, you have “exchanged the truth of God for the lie.” That’s why false religious teachers are so popular.

Furthermore:

B. They Reject Thinking About God – Notice what Paul said in the first part of v.28, “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge....” Literally, “they do not approve of having the full knowledge of God.” They examine the truth about God and rejected the knowledge of God. Why is that? Men do not like to be pricked in their conscience, so they devise means by which they can banish God from their knowledge. We have built cities and governments so that people can get along without God. Such people have expelled the knowledge of God from our public schools. Very little is said about God in a positive way on network TV. God is no longer talked about in normal conversation, except to take His name in vain. People either stay away from church, or they go to churches where the preacher the preachers never talk about sin or guilt. John 3:20 says, “Everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed.”

Do these verses describe you, or someone you know? Well people do have a free will. They can reject the truth about God, avoid thinking about God, and worship falsehoods instead, but such actions are not without consequences. So notice with me next of all:

II. MAN’S ABANDONMENT BY GOD

The true child of God will never be abandoned or forsaken by God, but those who reject God will be abandoned by God to suffer the consequences of their unbelief and sin. Three times Paul repeats the same phrase in vv.24, 26, and 28. The first two times it is translated, “God gave them up.” In v.28 it is translated “God gave them over” (*paradidomi*). The later translation is probably closer to the meaning. God gave such people over to the errors & sins that would destroy them. The repetition of that phrase sounds like the repetition of clods hitting a coffin.³ It’s a terrible thing to reach a point where God turns you loose to be destroyed by your own unbridled sin! After rejecting God again and again you can reach a point that God says, “Enough! I will leave you alone.” In Gen. 6:3 God said, “My Spirit shall not always strive with man.” You can reach a point where God just leaves you alone. When that happens, you will be destroyed by your own sin. There is undoubtedly a natural law of consequence operative in sin; it intensifies and aggravates itself when there is no restraint placed upon it.

Many do not want to believe that God would hold people responsible for their sin in this way, but it is the truth of the Word of God. Don’t create your own god, a god that would not turn

² “Rather than” is from *para*, which denotes the other side. It carries the idea that they “passed up” the Creator, in order to worship and serve the creatures.

³ A.T. Robertson makes a similar statement, p.330.

his back on anyone. The fact is, if you reject God and pursue false religion and sin, God will let you go until you fall into the destruction of your own sin. Perhaps when you reach bottom you will turn back to God.

This reminds me of the classic story of the prodigal son. He forsook his father & family, and pursued a life of sin. His father let him go his own way. It wasn't long before his self-centered life consumed all that he had. It was only when he was forsaken of all his so-called friends, destitute, and in the lowest of jobs, that he turned back to his father, and returned home.

So when a person rejects the true God, and makes his own gods, notice with me what such people are given over to:

A. To Their Sinful Desires & Passions – In v.24 Paul said, “Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves.” Then in v.26 he said, “God gave them up to vile passions.” And noticed that they “burned in their lust for one another.” The word translated “burned” (*ekkaio*) is intensive. It was an all-out endeavor to satisfy their totally-depraved nature. Such people never find lasting satisfaction. Their lust drives them to go from bar to bar trying to satisfy their lust for alcohol. They go to harder & harder drugs seeking satisfaction. They go from one immoral sexual experience to another trying to satisfy their lust for sex, even though it leads to the shame & disgrace of out-of-wedlock pregnancy, disease, and broken homes. God punished their sins by giving them over to the desire of their hearts.

The tragedy is that the Bible teaches us that the unsaved shall be dominated by the lusts of the heart even after death. Hell will be a place of endless frustration, desire without fulfillment, craving without satisfaction. This is the natural law of consequence. They reap a greater amount of suffering.

Furthermore, if you reject God, you will be given over:

B. To a Depraved, Degenerate Mind – In v.28 Paul said, “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting⁴.” “Debased” refers to something that is rejected as worthless after being put to the test. There is a play on words here. The same word in its verb form is translated “did not like” earlier in the verse. His moral demands did not satisfy the standard of the kind of God they wanted; so they rejected Him. As they thought God to be worthless, God delivered them up to a worthless mind. Paul says in v.21 that when people turned from God, they “became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.” They developed a mind incapable of reason and drawing proper conclusions, especially when it came to moral wisdom and spiritual truth, & the distinctions between right and wrong. Their conscience no longer worked properly, but grew insensitive. The depraved mind is well described in Proverbs 14:12, which says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” If you follow your own way of thinking instead of the Word of God, you will end up doing some rather foolish things.

I believe we see examples of depraved minds in many of the political policy makers of today. They see the problem of teen pregnancy and offer birth control and abortion as the solution. They see young people with low self-esteem, and try to solve it with self-esteem programs that make people more self-centered. God says children are best raised at home, but politicians with a depraved mind suggest that we need to take children out of the home & put them in government schools where God is not mentioned, even children as young as 4 years old!

⁴ The word translated “fitting” (*kathekon*) was a technical term of Stoic philosophy, denoting what constituted proper or fitting conduct.

By the way, our educational system in America is helping to produce the kind of minds described here. Any system of education that casts God out is an outcast type of education. Education that does not value God is ultimately a worthless education. There is no wisdom in the instruction that is antagonistic to the mind of God.

So when you reject God, you will be given over to burning, unfulfilled desires. You will be given over to a depraved, foolish mind. Finally, if you reject God, you will be given over:

C. To Moral Depravity – In v.24 Paul says God gave them over to “uncleanness.” That would include both bestiality & homosexuality, sins that “dishonor their bodies.” In vv.26-31 Paul gives a catalog of sins that were common in the pagan world of his day. Notice how these sins are so prevalent today. That ought to tell us something! Let’s start with the sin that Paul begins with:

1. Homosexuality – Paul says in vv.26-27, “For this reason God gave them up to vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.” Notice that Paul first deals with lesbianism in v.25. It may seem surprising that he mentions women first, but he does so because modesty is supposed to be woman’s most beautiful adornment (1 Tim. 2:9). It also was for the purpose of accentuating the grossness of the evil. Then he deals more extensively in v.26 with male homosexuality. When man rejects God, he also rejects the natural design of their Creator. God created male and female, husband and wife, mother and father. But homosexuality is the ultimate love of self in the sinful sense. Instead of intimate love with one of the opposite sex, some engage in burning lust with the same sex.

I would imagine that those of you who grew up prior to 1965 can hardly imagine what has happened in our country. Today in some of our major cities we have so-called gay pride marches, and I cannot tell you what is done in public while city officials look the other way. Homosexual kisses are now occasionally seen on network TV. Many states have approved so-called civil unions between homosexual partners. They have gone from asking us to tolerate perversity to now they are asking the state to give its stamp of approval upon it. After all, many believe that what is legal is moral and acceptable. This is one of the main symptoms of a society that has turned from God. You should also know that the abuse of sex has been one of the harbingers of the fall of nations throughout the recorded history of man.

We should notice Paul’s evaluation of homosexuality. In v.26 he indicates that homosexual passion is dishonorable and shameful (*atimia*). Then he points out in v.26b and v.27 that it is unnatural. Then in v.27b he says that such acts are indecent, unseemly, obscene. Yet they often feel no shame for what they are doing. And then, he says that those who engage in such an abomination will receive “the penalty of their error which was due.” Recent reports from Scandinavia indicate that the life expectancy of homosexuals is 20+ years shorter than that of heterosexuals [*Baptist Press*, Apr 17, 2007]. Many preachers have backed away from saying that AIDS is God’s judgment against homosexuality, but I’m not one of them. Granted, there are people who get AIDS through no fault of their own, but they are few and far between.

Now let me show you how depraved such people can be. Did you know that thousands of people knowingly infect themselves with the HIV virus each year, according to *Rolling Stone magazine* (Feb. 6, 2005)? Why would anyone knowingly infect himself with a fatal disease? One homosexual told *Rolling Stone* it’s all about the freedom associated with having HIV. Once you have the most deadly disease on the market, he said, you can participate in any sexual activity

without worrying about any further consequences. Such is a clear example of what we see here in Romans chapter 1.

Please don't misunderstand me. I don't want to have a harsh attitude toward the homosexual person. I suppose that most who practice homosexuality have homosexual feelings & desires that they acquired from childhood. They did not ask for such feelings. But there is hope for such a person to overcome those feelings and desires through Jesus Christ. He can set you free from that sin and all others as well.

When God gives people over to moral depravity, they become enslaved to:

2. Many Other Sins – In fact, Paul goes on to mention at least 21 additional sins that prove the guilt and sinfulness of man. [The KJV, based on later texts, has 23]. These are mostly sins of the spirit which are both anti-God and antisocial. They rend the fabric of society. He says in vv.29-31 that such people are “being filled with all unrighteousness,⁵ [sexual immorality], wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, [unforgiving], unmerciful.” What is so bad is that God says that man is full of these sins. These sins have become established in their character [perfect tense]. It starts with the fact that the seeds of all these things are an inherent part of the make-up of every one of us. As a person forsakes God, these sins take root and take over. Such passages as this teach the total depravity of man. We are sinful by nature, and we have the capacity for becoming overcome with evil.

Are you guilty of any of the sins listed here? Is anyone covetousness (*pleonexia*), never satisfied with what you have, but always wanting more? Is anyone here malicious? You have ill will toward someone, even to the point of desiring to harm them? Are you full of envy toward someone? You're unhappy about someone else's success or possessions? Does anyone here tend to engage in strife, contention, and wrangling? Are you guilty of deceit? Do you lie and deceive? Do we have any whisperers here, those who quietly slander or gossip about others? Do we have any backbiters (*katalalos*), who always tend to speak against others? Do we have anyone among us who is violent or insolent? This refers to behaving with insulting and humiliating arrogance to those who are not powerful enough to retaliate. Is anyone guilty of pride and boasting? I'm sure we have quite a few who have been “disobedient to parents.” This seems to be on the increase. Many are untrustworthy. They don't honor their word. Some are unloving in the sense of lacking national affection even for their own children. They abort or abandon their own children. In recent days we have seen vivid pictures of the way ungodly people can be so unmerciful. Terrorist show no mercy upon their victims, which often include women & children. We have heard too many horrible stories of school shootings, where young men with guns have shown no mercy to their victims. And mark my words, as our society turns from God more and more, we are going to see more and more of these sins manifested! The new morality is just the same old pagan immorality!

Folks, we see the terrible consequences of rejecting God. This should motivate us to do the opposite. We should seek to know, worship, and serve the true God. Are you doing that? We should do what Paul says in Romans 12:9, “Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good.”

Now in v.32 we reach the climax in Paul's argument. Here we see:

⁵ A colon could come after “unrighteousness:”, in which case Paul is giving examples of unrighteousness.

III. THE FINAL PROOF OF THE GUILT & CONDEMNATION OF MAN

Paul says in v.32, “who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.” Notice the 3 statements that Paul is making here:

A. Mankind Knows God’s Judgment Against Sin – Paul affirms that unbelievers know full well (*epiginosko*) “the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death.” The “death” referred to cannot reasonably be restricted to temporal death. Even pagans believed in divine retribution against evil, including after death. We all know deep inside that we are guilty before God and deserve death.

Tuesday morning while eating breakfast, I was watching Fox News. They told the story of what happened on the previous night’s [2/25/08] episode of Fox’s “The Moment of Truth.” They had the wife of a New York City cop. On the show she had to answer a series of questions truthfully to get the prize money. Well, she admitted to cheating on her husband. She admitted to wanting to be married to another man. Yet she came away from the show with no prize money after being eliminated. She was asked, “Are you a good person.” She said “yes,” but the polygraph detected a lie. Her conscience accused her of her guilt, and she could not hide it. She lost \$100,000 in prize money for lying!

So people know they are guilty before God, and that sin condemns them to death:

B. Yet, They Keep Doing these Sins - In spite of the fact that we know deep inside our consciousness that God is righteous and judges sin, we read in the middle of v.32 that they “do the same.” This knowledge does not prevent these same persons from indulging the sins which they know merit the judgment of God. Why is it that people keep doing things they know are harmful? It’s because sin is a terrible master. It controls us, and condemns us. We need Someone greater than ourselves to save us.

Finally, Paul saves the most hideous accusation for the end. Men & women are guilty before God because:

C. They Even Give Approval unto Sin – Paul says in the last of v.32, they “not only do the same but also approve [*suneudokeo*] of those who practice them.” Paul implies the way it ought to be. There ought to be a clear condemnation and disapproval of sin. Mom and dad ought to teach morals, and take a strong stand against sin. A person’s peer group ought to disapprove of sin and wrong. Certainly a person’s church ought to be a clear voice against all kinds of wrong. The community ought to come out against all kinds of sin and crime. The nation ought to pass laws against all kinds of evil. In such an environment people may go ahead and sin, but they will know that what they are doing is wrong, and they will hide their sin, and keep it to themselves, for they do not have the approval of others. That’s the way it *ought* to be.

But iniquity is most aggravated when it meets with no inhibition from the disapproval of others. That’s the situation we are facing today, and thus we are experiencing a terrible moral slide in this country. Mom and dad too often are not going to church, they are not teaching morals. They are too tired to teach right from wrong and discipline their children. They are too busy smoking, cussing, drinking, gambling, and running from one lover to another. We have parents today who are giving out birth control instead of teaching self-control! We have peer groups today that not only fail to discourage sin, but they even encourage others to sin, and applaud the most daring

sinners in their group. When someone talks about getting drunk, or getting stoned, or getting in a fight, or having immoral sex, their peers applaud them instead of rebuke them. We have pastors and churches who are silent about sin! Some are even excusing some sins and saying it is OK! Most states are actually sponsoring gambling, and encouraging the sin of greed (v.29)! At least one state has legalized homosexual marriage, which is the same as putting their stamp of approval on it. We have Supreme Court justices that say it is OK to kill your unborn baby. Politicians & so-called progressive thinkers want to pass out condoms and tell young people it is OK to commit fornication. We have an entertainment industry that is constantly sending the message of approval of all kinds of sinful activities. No wonder our country is getting into such a mess [give statistics?]. We are doing exactly what Paul says in v.32, and that is the ultimate expression of evil in the heart of man. If we do not quite rejecting God and His moral standards, we are going to reap some terrible consequences.

Conclusion: As we look at America today, we see much of Romans 1 played out right before our eyes. Most say they believe in God, but they believe in a false god rather than the One true God revealed in the Bible. Most have examined the God of the Bible and have rejected Him. As a result, God has rejected them, and turned them over to the controlling and condemning power of sin. As a result, our society is becoming more and more depraved in both mind and morals.

What should we do? The apostle Peter said in Acts 2:40, “Be saved from this perverse generation.” Is anyone here tired of the unfulfilled life, and life of unsatisfied desires? Well I invite you to turn to Jesus. He said in John 4:14, “whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst.” He gives living water that truly satisfies. Is anyone here tired of a life of sin? Seek to know the One true God. Embrace Him. Love Him. Worship Him. Serve Him. Obey Him. He sent His Son to die on the cross for your sins. He will forgive you and set you free from the power of sin if you repent of sin, and place your faith in Him. He will help you live a good and godly life, a life that is truly satisfying and full of joy.

We believers cannot change society all at once. We can only do so one person at a time. If we change people, we can change society. Let us commit ourselves to being a witness of Christ to an ungodly generation. Share your faith. Invite others to church. Let’s do what we can to turn the tide of the moral slide to destruction as a nation.

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse (except v.32), *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Hershel Hobbs, *Romans: A Verse by Verse Study* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); Leon McBeth, *Exegetical & Practical Commentary on Romans* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Kenneth S. Wuest’s *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).