

We left off last time at vs. 18 of Chapter 1. I finished by pointing out that we are about to begin a large section of Romans that deals with Paul expounding on the issue of sin. As we delve into this I want to remind you of what I feel is important to keep in mind on this difficult topic.

1. Romans 3:23 – “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” Paul reminds us that before a Holy God we all fall short. In that sense we are all in the same boat in God’s eyes, sinners in need of repentance and God’s forgiveness and mercy.
2. Jesus example with the story of the woman caught in adultery. John 8:1-11– Jesus says to the angry crowd of Jews, who in accordance with Jewish law pick up stones to stone her to death, says to them: “he who is without sin, cast the first stone”. This shows a radical departure from the old ways of the law. Love and mercy are deemed to be a higher good than punitive retribution. It is one of the more remarkable stories of how Jesus is introducing to the world a new way, a way based on love and forgiveness. However, it is very important to note that after the angry crowd had dropped their stones and left quietly, Jesus looks at the woman and says: “Woman has no one condemned you?”. She says “no one Lord” (she must have known Jesus and followed him to call him Lord), Jesus then says to her, “**neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more**”.

It is critical to note that Jesus is not saying that adultery is alright. He is not redefining the moral code and redefining the law. Adultery is one of the 10 commandments! So, he is saying that the law and God’s standards do not change. But there is forgiveness for our sins. And there is also an expectation that we will repent and amend our fallen ways.

We are about to get into the issue in Romans of homosexuality, which is complex, painful and filled with human brokenness. For me it is a very personal issue:

Jane is a Godmother to my first-born son, Jonathan. She was a member of my church 35 years ago. She was a wonderful person with a strong faith. One day she came to me and revealed she was a lesbian. I was shocked, I had no idea. I was caught by complete surprise. I loved Jane. She was loving, thoughtful and faithful. She then asked me if I would bless her relationship with her partner. I told Jane I could not do so as a priest, as much as I cared about her and had a family attachment with her, because it would be blessing something I felt went against God’s purposes and Biblical teaching. This unwillingness to bless her relationship was very hurtful to Jane, she was devastated. As you might expect we soon drifted apart and haven’t spoken to each other in 35 years.

I share this story because I believe it is important to base our moral opinions and what we do, on guidance from God’s Word, not from what culture is dictating. First and foremost, we are called to love all people and I did that with Jane. I didn’t condemn her, but I didn’t feel that I should let me love and affection for Jane allow me to say I would ignore God’s standards and teaching. Jane respected my integrity as a priest and it cost us our relationship.

OK – lets look at Paul’s teaching on sin. Ch. 1:18 -3:20 – are referred to as – “universal sinfulness”. Let’s read 1:18-31 (read them).

**Before Paul can expound a wonderful treatise on salvation, he first must establish our need for it.** The question is what are we saved from? So, to set the table if you will to proclaim salvation through faith, Paul feels it is critical to talk about our problem and the human predicament. Today, part of modern man’s dilemma is that our culture says – “what I do is my choice, and as long as I do not hurt anyone, it is none of your business what I choose to do. This cultural norm, based on a long history of “personal freedom and liberty”, runs against Christian teaching. We Christians believe that “we belong to one another” in Christ. What I choose to do affects you and everyone else. So, if I choose to live life selfishly, it affects you. If I want to roll down my car window and throw trash out the window, it affects you and spoils God’s creation. What you and I choose to do affects every living thing.

So today, even within the church, Paul is not liked by many even of the faith. Our logic goes, “after all, I haven’t murdered anyone, I am a pretty decent guy, by my own standards and the standards of the culture”. And therein lies

the big question: By whose standards do we measure ourselves? By our own standards as measured by culture? Or do we measure our self by God's standards? By culture's standards I do well. By God's standards I fall short. We all do.

Vs. 18 – “the wrath of God is being revealed, from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth”. God's wrath – against sin is due to His holiness. Sin is anathema to God. Sin destroys God's creation.

Vs. 18-32 – most scholars believe are written to describe the Gentile (all non-Jews) world. But these verses describe all people of all races. They describe our dilemma. In these verses Paul homes in on two primary evils:

1. Idolatry
2. Immorality

We need to remember that in the Roman times, most all the prevailing religions of the day were based on the cycles of nature and fertility. The Old Testament prophets rail against the worship of Baal among the Canaanites. Baal was worshipped because of the desire to have abundant crops. The God known as Baal was also called by other names: Lord of the earth, Lord of the rain, Lord of the dew. His consort was Asherah – who was depicted as a nude pregnant woman. Baal and Asherah were worshipped by almost all the Canaanite peoples. When you recall the exodus, you will remember that the Hebrews were promised they were on their way to Canaan, “a land flowing with milk and honey”, and because the land of the Canaanites was very fertile, crops flourished there. So, fertility was at the center of worship in the days of Jesus and Paul's lives in the Roman world. The people who lived there attributed their fertile crops yields to their worship of Baal. Part of this theology of nature's cyclical rhythm had to do with sexual freedom. Fertility and sexual encounter were a part of the culture of the times, which most likely explains in part why Paul felt called to speak out against homosexuality and sexual promiscuity.

In 1954, Jacques Ellul, a French Roman Catholic philosopher, theologian, and sociologist wrote a book called “The Technological Society”. It is considered by some to be a seminal work on how technology will change our lives. Ellul had some concerns and with a prophetic voice shared his concern that one day rather than man being in control of technology, one day technology had the potential to control us. In one section of the book he deals with the change that was taking place due to the advent of the birth control pill. Margaret Sanger developed the birth control pill in 1950. Ellul cautioned us that this new pill, which would forever alter society, was going to create a whole different world, along with other technological advances. Was Ellul right? Soon after his book was written, the sexual revolution occurred in the 1960's. The moral teaching and fabric of Biblical teaching, namely that sexual encounter had as its primary purpose the propagation of the human race, was shifted to sex a cultural philosophy of sex primarily for pleasure. The biblical emphasis is on “be fruitful and multiply”, a way for us to perpetuate the human race.

So, what has been some of the results of the shift to sexual freedom? Well today we are in the midst of the “me too” movement, and this reflects the breakdown of boundaries over sexual norms and expectations. Abortion may well be a reflection of the success of the birth control bill to prevent pregnancy, by disrupting a woman's normal fertility cycle. Sadly, abortion has become a normative way of exercising birth control. If sex is primarily about our pleasure, then when conception occurs, it is deemed OK to put to death the child that consensual sex created in accordance with God's natural laws. The list could go on. Pornography runs rampant in our culture today and people today who do not base their sexual experience on Biblical norms, find themselves unsatisfied chasing culture's norms. Was Ellul on to something when he warned about what the consequences of the new freedoms the birth control pill would bring to human kind and human choice? I will leave that for you to ponder. The chase for sexual fulfillment seems to never be able to be satisfied. Maybe God's norms for sex have some merit after all. To achieve sexual freedom, we have put ourselves into bondage. May our daughters be protected from the predators that are certain their sexual freedoms are top priority no matter whose lives are damaged in the wake.

Well back to Paul.

Two evils, Idolatry and Immorality. Let's look at idolatry first.

One of the reasons that sexual promiscuity and homosexuality were rampant was because all the God's in the Canaanite and Roman culture were idols. An inanimate statue or image doesn't care about what you do. **An idol is not relational in nature. So it makes no difference to an idol what you do with your life.**

**But with Christianity, you are in a relationship with the living God.** It is a covenant, with God. God has expectations of you, God makes promises to you and you to Him, God makes demands upon you. As with marriage covenants, we are not free to do anything we want. Love is relational, idols are not. So, it is not a surprise that Paul has to address the idolatry first, which places no restriction on sexual immorality. In fact, being connected with fertility issues that are connected to economic issues of bountiful crops, sexual promiscuity is almost encouraged. Jesus and Paul lived in a world, particularly among the Gentiles, where you could do whatever you wanted to do. You worshipped Idols. Who cared? Not so with a relationship with Jesus Christ. He expects us to live in accordance with His standards. For Paul then, sin is real. Paul is often not liked today by many people even sadly within the Church, particularly within the Episcopal Church, because Paul is unwavering in his condemnation of immorality as defined by God's standards. Many mainline Protestant denominations today are being defined by culture's standards.

And this applies for Paul to all behavior, not just sexual behavior. We are called to live generously, not in a self-centered way. We are called to live with servant hearts, like Jesus did. We are called to "lay down our lives for our friends". Idols don't require that. Jesus Christ does. He knows that when we live life by His standards, we will be blessed with joy, peace, love, fulfillment and the list of blessings goes on and on.

Idolatry and Immorality were taken on by Paul because they reflect the problem of the Roman culture and world that Jesus came to change.