

Romans – Session # 6

We left off last week having begun Paul's long treatise on sin. We remembered that Romans is Paul's most theological letter, intended to be his treatise on God's grace and plan of salvation. So, before Paul turns to God's saving act on the cross, he feels compelled to tell the church "what we are saved from". And that is, we are saved from the consequences of our sin before a Holy God. In Romans 1:18, Paul speaks of "the wrath of God", against "all ungodliness and wickedness of men."

In Vs. 18-32 Paul speaks of 2 major categories of sin:

1. Idolatry
2. Immorality

We mentioned that it is very important to remember that most of the Canaanite religious practice had to do with the worship of Baal and Asherah, the God and Goddess of fertility. Canaanite religion was based on the cycles of nature, much like the religion of Native Americans. The Canaanites desired fertility, so that their crops would have a great yield.

And then in Roman times, when Jesus and Paul lived, every kind of God existed for every kind of need and purpose. Everyone had an idol, in their homes. Acts 17:16-34 tells of the prevalence of idol worship in the great city of Athens. Read Acts 17:16-34. This is the context of Paul's naming idolatry as a major problem that held people captive to the worship of false God's, the creature rather than the creator.

And finally, last week we noted that one of the consequences of people worshipping idols, inanimate objects, is that there is not possibility of having a relationship with an idol. Idols have no advice to give, no moral hold on people's lives. Therefore, there is nothing to say "no" to Paul's second category of sin – immorality.

Christianity is a "relational faith" with the living God who places standards and expectations upon us. Covenants state what those standards and expectations are and tell us what the benefits of the covenant are (i.e. eternal life). So, it is easy to see why idolatry and immorality goes hand in hand.

Vs. 18 – So God's wrath reflects a passionate and loving God who desires the best for His people. He is angry when people substitute the worship of the only living and true God for the worship of things – which is put so beautifully by Paul in Luke's Book of the Acts of the Apostles in Acts 17:16-34 (read these verses). The truth about relationships is that we usually only get angry at those we love. God's anger against sin is a righteous wrath. The sending of His Son, to die on the cross is our heavenly Father's way of redeeming us, by taking upon Himself, our sins. Paul says in Vs. 18 of Chapter One, that it is the wickedness of men, that suppresses TRUTH>

Vs. 19-20 – Are Paul's hint that God reveals Himself in what is called "Natural Revelation". This idea is that down through a person's life, we are exposed to God by the natural order. We can sense God in a beautiful sunset, or by gazing at the mountains. Nature reveals God's love and we should experience it. So, Paul is saying we can know God through the natural order. Many of us know that we do indeed feel close to God when we see beauty in nature. Paul is not saying anything in these two verses about a saving knowledge of God. That comes through one event only, the historical act of Jesus death on the cross and His resurrection; and our believing in it by our placing our trust in Him. Nature does reveal God's glory, but not in a salvific way. Paul is saying, God has given us natural revelations of Himself and if we are clued into them, we could live a Godlier life. Paul is saying we have sinned against the light we have been given. Paul is saying we can know right from wrong, by God's natural revelation of Himself.

Vs. 21-23 – Given the revelation they had been given, they chose to reject God's ways and their minds became darkened. They (vs 23) exchanged the glory of the immortal God and worshipped idols resembling mortal man, or birds, or animals or reptiles. Paul is saying when we reject following God, we follow idols of our own making, and we are "lost". The people preferred a religion of their own making. Vs. 21 – when we reject God our thinking becomes futile.

Paul is saying something about man's Ontological Nature. God made us in His Image, the Imago Dei. We are created with a God given need to worship something. We will worship something, it is in our DNA so to speak. The major

question is: What do we choose to worship? About 2 years ago, I dragged Nancy down to test drive a Mazda Miata. It is a beautiful little sports car. I could see myself tooling around town in it. But Nancy pointed out neither one of us would be able to get out of it. Not the most practical choice. Idols never are.

Vs. 24 Paul points out, as we have said, that the consequences of idolatry are our drifting into immorality. Paul states the consequences to the people's relationship with God. He says: "God gave them up". This is a very important theological truth that we do not always realize. God allows us to experience the consequences of our choices. Sin is a result of the worship and honoring God and replacing it with the worship of idols. God allows us to suffer the consequences, as Nate pointed out in his sermon on the prodigal son, the text of his sermon. The Father in the story gave him his wish, he let his son choose. Love does not force us to do what God wants us to do. We can go our separate ways. But when the prodigal son realized that he had made a horrible choice, he went back to the Father's home and his father welcomed him back home, even killing the fatted calf and celebrating much to the older son's dismay.

So, when you and I make bad choices, God lets us go. Some never find their way back like the prodigal did. They are lost forever. That is why I believe St. Bede's building our new church is so important, so if God lets people go, we can go find them and lead them back to Him. So many people are suffering in despair and loneliness. We need to help them return, or if they never knew God's love, help them to discover it for the first time. God's promise is twofold: I will save you in this life in your existential misery, but better still, I will save you for all eternity.

Vs. 25 – Paul says: "they exchanged the truth about God for a lie, they worshipped the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen" Scholars have little doubt that Paul has in mind, the ritual prostitution which was all but universal in the idolatrous religious practices of the First Century. History shows in one large temple alone, there were more than 1,000 temple prostitutes. Creating idols in the likeness of man, leads to immoral types of worship. In the nature/fertility cults people thought and were taught that by engaging in sexual intercourse as an "act of worship", their crops would flourish. It was fertility based, agricultural based world, and worship practices were aimed at fertility. Paul of course says this ended up in human degradation.

"they exchanged the truth of God for a lie. They worshipped the creature rather than the Creator" They venerated the creature, and they venerated themselves. Self-indulgence, not the self-sacrifice that Jesus preached. Paul ends this by praising God, the Creator, who is blessed forever. God is the constant one to be worshipped and blessed for all time.

Vs. 26 – Paul repeats the theme - That "God gave them up". God allows us to stray from Him. True love cannot force us to be what God wants us to be. We have choice. In Romans – Women choose to engage in sexual activity with women, and men with men. Sin has therefore the breakdown of the natural order.

I would caution us to remember that sexual confusion is not the only kind of sin manifested by our forsaking the worship of God and replacing that with the worship of idols of our own choosing. Lust and uncontrolled sexual desire are only one manifestation among many. The list of the way our sins manifest themselves is many. So why does St. Paul focus in on one manifestation of sin, namely unnatural sexual expression, which is at odds with God's stated intention that sexual relations belong within the marriage relationship of husband and wife?

The answer seems simple. The worship of idols, the Canaanite fertility cults, all involved liturgical sexual expression and Paul wanted to be sure people know that only was to be worshipped – Jesus Christ.

Vs. 28 – "Since they did not see fit to acknowledge God" - Paul says they thrust God out of their lives, so for the third time Paul uses the phrase – God gave them up.

Vs. 29 – Finally Paul lists all the other bad consequences of forsaking God to pursue idolatry of our own choices and making. Envy, murder, strife, deceit, malignity, gossip, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.

Sadly, Paul's focus on sexual sins are all that most people focus on in Paul's theology. So, I do not think Paul felt homosexuality was worse than the list we just read. All sin is an abomination to God, and we each manifest our sins in a different way. We must remember Paul hammers on it in part because this was what was going on in his day, worship

that was really nothing but an orgy. Paul had to address it and address it hard. But do not think for a moment that Paul thought that was the worst of all sins. Every sin is equally an affront to a holy God.

Chapter 1 – ends with a final condemnation by Paul. Paul says, sadly, though people know better and they that people who do these things deserve to die, they not only do them, they approve of those who practice them!!! People do not act out of ignorance, they know better, but they choose to follow their own path. The consequences are grave (pun intended)