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The Human Heart is an Idol Factory **Romans 1:18-25**

Have you ever wondered why there are so many non-Christian religions in the world? Have you ever wondered where they came from? How and why did they develop? Are they all simply variations of the truth or perhaps imperfect pathways to the one true God? What relationship, if any, do they sustain to biblical Christianity? And is it arrogant and judgmental of us to suggest that they are all in error and that Christianity alone embodies the truth about God and eternal life?

These are questions that we all ask at one time or another, especially when we find ourselves in conversation with a Muslim or a Buddhist or a Hindu or a follower of some other religious or philosophical system. The good news is that the apostle Paul speaks to this very point in our passage today. But before we dive into this controversial topic, a brief review is in order.

Last week we dug deeply into this incredibly rich, complex, and indescribably important passage in the book of Romans. Let me briefly remind us all of what we discovered.

(1) The wrath of God is not something reserved solely for the future. Yes, God's wrath will be revealed in the judgments that he brings against the unbelieving world, those whom the book of Revelation calls "earth-dwellers." And yes, God's wrath will be manifest at the final judgment. But Paul says in v. 18 that God's wrath is already being revealed, now, in the present day.

(2) We also were told by Paul that all human beings know that God exists and that they are responsible to honor or worship him as God, and that they should give thanks to him. Paul repeatedly made this clear when he used such phrases as: "suppress the truth" (v. 18b; you can't be guilty of suppressing the truth unless you know what the "truth" is and choose to reject it); "what can be known about God is plain to them" (v. 19a); "God has shown it to them" (v. 19b); God's attributes have been "clearly perceived" (v. 20a); therefore all "are without excuse" (v. 20b); all men and women "know God" (v. 21a); and all choose to "exchange the glory of the immortal God" for idols (v. 23a; one cannot make such an exchange unless one knows what the "glory" of God is).

So what is the truth that people suppress? They suppress or deny or push out of their conscious thinking that there is a God, that he is the Creator of all things, that he is infinitely powerful and eternal and that everything exists for his glory and praise and that they are ultimately accountable to him alone.

(3) Perhaps the most important phrase in the entire paragraph comes at the close of v. 20 – "***So they are without excuse.***" Paul couldn't have said it more clearly: no one will ever be able to excuse their unbelief by saying they didn't have enough evidence for God's existence or information about what he is like.

(4) From this we rightly conclude that the so-called "heathen" or "pagans", be they from Africa or the Sudan or right here in America, will not be held accountable by God or judged by him for not believing in the gospel or the name of Jesus which they have never heard. Rather, they will be held accountable and judged for their willful rejection of the existence and knowledge of God which God himself so clearly made known to them in creation. It is their willful refusal to "honor" and "thank" the God they know exists that serves as the basis or reason for their final judgment.

(5) The revelation of God in nature is sufficient to render all men without excuse, sufficient to lead to their condemnation if they repudiate it, but not sufficient to save. No one will be saved solely because of

their acknowledgment of God in nature, but many will be lost because of their refusal of him as revealed there.

If by God's gracious and sovereign enablement and enlightenment, any unbeliever responds to the revelation of God in nature (and conscience), God will take the necessary steps to reach him or her with the good news of Christ whereby they may be saved.

Romans 1:21-25

Today, we are going to dig even deeper into this passage, with special attention given to vv. 21-25. Here we find seven major points made by Paul.

(1) Here in this passage the apostle Paul tells us about the origin and nature of all false, non-Christian religions.

Note carefully that Paul does not say that people begin in ignorance of God and move progressively toward him in the pursuit of truth. No. He says they begin with the clear and undeniable knowledge of God and willfully choose to turn and run from him. People don't begin in spiritual darkness and futility and slowly grope their way toward the light. Rather, they began with the clear, inescapable light of the knowledge of God and regressed into darkness.

This is incredibly important. Paul portrays the human race as knowing God, clearly perceiving who he is and what he is like, aware that he alone is deserving of praise and gratitude, and then choosing to turn their backs on him. Even though "they knew God" (v. 21a), they became "futile in their thinking" and "their foolish hearts were darkened" (v. 21b).

(2) What does Paul mean when he describes them as "futile" in thinking and "darkened" in their foolish hearts?

He does not mean that all non-Christian pagans are stupid. Many of them are far more intelligent than we who are believers! It is not man's intelligence that is in view but his disposition. The problem with the unsaved isn't that he can't think with his head. The problem is that he refuses to believe with his heart. ***The unsaved man is a fool not because he is of questionable intelligence. He is a fool because of his immoral refusal to acknowledge and bow to what he knows is true.***

What Paul has in mind in vv. 21-23 involves a distortion or deliberate mutation when one substitutes something artificial or counterfeit for that which is genuine. Clearly, then, ***when man rejects God, he does not cease to be religious. Indeed, he becomes religious in order to reject God.*** He substitutes for God a deity of his own making, often himself.

This bears repeating. When you see someone embracing a pagan belief system or following a cult or immersed in animism or Buddhism or Hinduism or any non-Christian religious perspective, don't ever think it is because they have never had the opportunity to know about the one true God. Precisely the opposite is true. They clearly knew this God, they understood his existence, nature, and the obligations that this entails for humans, and they deliberately turn their back on him. They willfully choose to suppress the truth about him that is clearly made known to them.

Their thinking is “futile” (v. 21) because they believe as true what is patently false. It is futile because it accomplishes nothing of value. It is the sort of thinking that leads only to darkness and death. They think they have found the truth when in fact they already had it but turned and embraced what is false. They didn’t like the truth. They didn’t want the truth. They chose instead to give their love and allegiance and worship to some idol or religious belief system of their own making.

The word futile means useless, without value or power, empty and aimless. God gave us minds so that we might glorify him with them: by thinking exalted thoughts about God, by crafting beautiful language that describes him as he is. But people have taken this precious gift of “thinking” and turned it against itself. ***The mind is now being used to formulate arguments against the one who created the mind!***

More than that, “their foolish hearts were darkened.” Paul not only focuses on their intellectual understanding but also their affections, their “hearts.” By saying their hearts were “darkened” he means they are blind to the beauty of Christ. They do not love him, as they should. They do not cherish or prize or treasure him as he is deserving. They think they live in the light. They are convinced that they see things clearly. They are persuaded that their take on reality is the truth. But in fact, they live in darkness and have rebelled against the knowledge that God so graciously gave them.

(3) Paul then says that when people do this, they actually believe they are “wise” (v. 22). They claim that they have discovered the ultimate meaning in life and that their understanding of whether or not there is a God and what he is like and whether he is worthy of worship is the only prudent path to follow. But Paul says they become “fools” (v. 22b), for they have taken the truth and exchanged it for a lie.

We see this all the time today. Those who reject the God of Christianity try to persuade others that this is the path of true intelligence; this is the way to experience genuine spiritual enlightenment. Anyone with more than a third-grade education, so they say, should be able to recognize that the God of the Bible either doesn’t exist, or if he does exist, is not the sort of God worthy of our praise. They pass themselves off as humble searchers after truth, when they are in fact arrogant rebels against what God has already revealed to them.

(4) We also see here the cause for all idolatry. An exchange takes place. They have been shown the “glory” of the one true God but choose to ***exchange*** it for something else to worship: “images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things” (v. 23).

What Paul has in mind involves a distortion or deliberate mutation when one substitutes something artificial or counterfeit for that which is genuine. Clearly, then, as I said earlier, when man rejects God, he does not cease to be religious. Indeed, he becomes religious in order to reject God.

Think of it this way. Ann and I have been married over 48 years. We genuinely enjoy each other’s company even after so long a time together. What would she think of me, indeed, what would *you* think of me, if I went out and spent a substantial amount of money for someone to produce or build a replica of her with which I might replace her? It might be a really good replica, one that truly looks like her in every way. But I tell Ann that she is no longer needed. I’ve found a replacement. This replica, this replacement of her can’t talk, smile, think, act, or feel any emotions. But I choose to sleep beside this replica, eat with

this replica, and when people visit our home, I lock Ann away in the closet and present this substitute as my true wife.

You would probably laugh at the very thought of such a ridiculous decision on my part. Worse still, you would probably take steps to have me evaluated by a psychiatrist and recommend that I be institutionalized.

But for people created in the very image of God to reject him, repudiate him, deny that he is worthy of their affection and devotion, and in his place craft idols made of marble or granite or wood is immeasurably worse.

What makes this even more ridiculous is that in doing so people claim to be “wise.” “It’s the only reasonable and prudent thing to do,” so they say. And it doesn’t even have to be a physical object with which they replace God. It may be an idea, a mental image, a worldview, another religion, anything to which they can devote themselves and direct their love and gratitude. Is it any wonder, then, why Paul would call them “fools”?

There is nothing more precious, more beautiful, more wonderful than the glory of God. And here are people to whom that glory has been revealed saying, “Yuk. I don’t want it. I actually prefer to exchange it for the lifeless, stupid, vain idols of my own making. Let’s switch. In place of the immeasurable treasure of the glory of the Creator himself, I will put weak, mute, impotent objects that resemble things that the Creator himself has made.”

This alone demonstrates the magnitude of human depravity. To replace the infinitely superior with the inferior is insanity. To replace the most beautiful with the ugly and repulsive makes no sense. To prefer what is dead and impotent to what is alive and all-powerful is beyond comprehension. To take what is of infinite value and replace it with what is fundamentally worthless points to the depths to which human depravity will go to avoid honoring and obeying God.

Look at the downward spiral of human idolatry. It is bad enough to exchange the inimitable and priceless glory of God for an idol in the form of a man or woman. At least men and women are created in the image of God. But it doesn’t stop there. In humanity’s rebellion against God they make images in the form of birds. At least birds can fly. They are majestic in their own way. But it doesn’t stop there. They then craft idols in the form of animals, be they dogs or bears or alligators or monkeys. But it doesn’t stop there. So wicked and stubborn and determined to put God out of their experience, they resort to make images of creeping things: spiders and snakes and other reptiles.

Because of their idolatry, God gave them up to immorality. Note the progression. They first abandon God and turn to false religion. In turn, God abandons them and they turn to sexual immorality. It isn’t that they started out in ignorance. Oh, no. They had the “truth about God” (v. 25). But they preferred living on the basis of a lie. They first exchanged the glory of God for lifeless and useless idols. They then exchange the truth about God for lies. They refuse to worship the Creator and instead exchange him for the creature.

(5) *The story in Romans 1 is not one of man's gradual evolution up the ladder of spiritual enlightenment, but of his grievous devolution into the depths of sin and rebellion. The history of man's religious experience is not an ascent upward into truth, but a descent downward into idolatry. It is not progression but regression.*

In other words, non-Christian religions are not stages in the development of humanity brought about by the absence of the knowledge of God. Rather, they are the result of a deliberate denial of God and a refusal to glorify and honor him as God. ***Idolatry and non-Christian religions are not signs that men and women are searching for the truth, but evidence that they do not want it.*** Says Sproul:

“According to Paul, religion is not the fruit of a zealous pursuit of God, but the result of a passionate flight from God. The glory of God is exchanged for an idol. The idol stands as a monument not to religious fervor but to the flight of man from his initial encounter with the glory of God” (*The Psychology of Atheism*, 69).

What this means is that all forms of so-called non-Christian religion, however sophisticated or primitive they may be, are *not* an indication of man's struggle to *discover* God, but rather of man's desperate attempt to *deny* him.

The world's many religions and philosophies are not the efforts of men and women to reach God but a deliberate, contrived, cold-hearted attempt to run away from him.

Paul's point is that humanity does not begin in ignorance of God and patiently works its way to knowledge. Humanity begins with knowledge and makes its way wickedly to ignorance and idolatry.

People often argue that non-Christian religions are preparatory to faith in Christ, that they are the initial groping of a hungry heart for truth. ***NO***. They are, in fact, a repudiation of the truth, the expression of a deep-seated hatred of Christ. The study of world religions is not the study of human progress toward God but of human rebellion against him.

(6) So here is the great lesson to be learned: the reason the mind evades, twists, distorts, manipulates and suppresses the truth of God is not primarily because we are mentally deficient, but because we are morally deformed. We suppress the light of God's glory and power because we love the darkness of our own independence. We love our sins, our self-determination, and therefore we suppress the truth that God is God and that we are to depend on him and live for his glory.

Clearly, then, the most severe and serious sin that anyone can commit is to trifle with, trample on, and exchange the glory of God for a pathetic substitute. This is the most momentous issue facing our world. It isn't who gets elected President or whether or not climate change is man-made. The gravest and most grievous problem of the universe of mankind concerns what people are making of the glory of God. Paul's primary question for all of us is this: “What do we make of the glory of God? How do we respond to it? Do we magnify it by treasuring it above all things? Or do we belittle it by preferring other things and exchanging it for created things?”

(7) What is God's response to this willful repudiation of him by those created in his image? Paul tells us in vv. 24-25.

“Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen” (Rom. 1:24-25).

Notice two things here.

First, this is the second time we read about an *“exchange.”* In v. 23 they “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man” and all manner of creatures. Now in v. 25, once again “they exchanged the truth about God for a lie.” There is one more exchange that we’ll look at in the coming weeks. We read of it in vv. 26-27. There Paul says that “women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature,” an obvious reference to lesbianism. And the men likewise “gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another.” This “giving up” by men is simply another way of saying they “exchanged” God’s good design for something that is utterly contrary to it.

Second, we read in v. 24 that “God gave them up”, or “God gave them over,” a phrase that will reappear in v. 26 and again in v. 28. Three times Paul says, “God gave them up.” What does this mean?

There are two fundamental elements involved:

(1) *Permissive* - God withdraws divine restraint on men's hearts and permits them to have their way (see Acts 14:16). God relinquishes his hold over them and ceases to curb their willful determination to sin. Think of God's restraining influence as if it were an emergency brake in a car. The car is parked on an incline. The car's own weight, combined with the force of gravity, would cause it to careen down the hill and crash. But the emergency brake prevents this from happening. When God releases the emergency brake on men's hearts, by virtue of their natural inclination and sinful impulses, they race down the hill and crash. However, God's action in response to human sin is more than simply permissive.

(2) *Positive* - God doesn't simply let them go. He also positively consigns them to suffer the consequences of their sin. It is not merely divine relinquishment but also divine retribution. As Douglas Moo points out, “God does not simply let the boat go – he gives it a push downstream. Like a judge who hands over a prisoner to the punishment his crime has earned, God hands over the sinner to the terrible cycle of ever-increasing sin” (106).

There are three additional issues to note:

First, Paul does not say that God is himself the cause of their impurity or idolatry. Rather, God gives them over *to* degrading passions. The act of divine relinquishment presupposes the existence of these sins. God gives them over to what they have already chosen for themselves. “In the midst of the retributive action of God there is no coercion of man. God does not entice or compel to evil” (S. Lewis Johnson). He doesn’t have to. We are already by nature inclined and predisposed to evil and idolatry. God, in righteous judgement, simply lets us go our chosen way.

Second, that to which God gives them over is not simply their sin but a deeper and more intense cultivation of their sin. In the absence of divine restraint (common grace), sin intensifies and aggravates itself. When God abandons someone to his sin, that sin *accelerates*.

I will have much more to say about this in the coming weeks, but when you read in Romans 1:26-32 of the depths of human sin and depravity, you shouldn’t respond by saying: “Oh, my, won’t this bring down God’s judgment on us and our society?” Folks, the ever-increasing sin and depravity that we see in vv. 26-32 *is* God’s judgment on us and our society.

Third, a careful study of vv. 23-25 indicates that it is idolatry which leads to immorality. Men first abandon God and then God abandons them into the depths of every conceivable vice. Sexual perversion, says Paul, is the result of religious rebellion. This is also seen in the words Paul employs. Those who “exchanged” (v. 23) God’s glory and “exchanged” (v. 25) his truth “exchanged” (v. 26) natural sexual relations for what is unnatural. Simply put, ***sexual immorality is the consequence of human idolatry.***

Some of you may be asking yourself: “Is this really all that big of a deal? It seems to me that Paul is making a mountain out of a molehill.” If that is what you are thinking, you have very little grasp on who God is and what he is like. Let’s not rush past what Paul is saying in v. 25. He describes God as being “blessed forever!” God is blessed, beautiful, majestic, glorious, powerful, just, kind, tender-hearted, holy, compassionate, long-suffering, gracious, merciful, loving, righteous, and on and on it goes. That is what makes this horrific “exchange” so evil. It is the exchange of truth for a lie; an exchange of the Creator for the creature.

I can only say that to whatever extent you think that what mankind has done isn’t all that bad and what God has done in response is an over-reaction, you have very little grasp on who the God of the Bible truly is.

Paul is doing everything he can to point out and highlight the immeasurable difference in value between God and every man-made idol. It is not simply the difference between the real deal and a copy, but between the only true God and a copy of a copy of a copy. My favorite painting is by Pierre Auguste Renoir. It is called, “Luncheon of the Boating Party.” The original hangs in the Philipps Museum in Washington, D.C. When I was there about ten years ago, I visited the museum and stood in front of that magnificent work of art for about an hour. Before leaving, I purchased a large, beautifully framed print of the original. It currently hangs in our bedroom. The home page of my laptop computer is “Luncheon of the Boating Party.”

If some kind and generous soul offered to give me, free of charge, the original of that painting (which would probably cost around \$50 million), what would you say about me if I declined the offer and said, "No need for that. I've got a copy." You would rightly conclude that I was a complete idiot! To place a higher value on one of thousands of prints of the original, above that of the original itself, is lunacy.

But that is precisely what the unbelieving world has done with God. As John Piper has put it, you would be trading the most exquisite and priceless diamond for a rotten peach forgotten at the back of the refrigerator. You would be trading a beautiful ruby for a banana that has been sitting in the sun for two days. You would be trading a bar of gold for a copper bolt rusting in the rain.

Conclusion

Is there any hope left for us? Is there any hope for the human race at large? Is it too late for a reversal? I don't pretend to know if it is too late, but I can assure you that there is always hope for those who will repent and turn to Jesus. The hope has already been stated clearly in vv. 16-17. It is found only in the gospel. Why? Because "it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."

In this gospel we find the righteousness that is required by God for acceptance in his presence. And the good news is that this isn't a righteousness we have to create or produce or maintain. It is a righteousness that God himself so graciously provides for us in and through his Son, Jesus Christ, that we receive not by being righteous ourselves, but entirely on the basis of faith.