



Most of us have heard the expression “easier said than done.” Would you also agree that it’s “easier *sung* than done”? I find that it’s easier to *sing* about the King of love being the “Ruler of my heart” than it is to *submit* to him as the Ruler of my heart. In fact, it’s impossible to do so apart from the grace of God.

Our natural inclination as sinners is to rebel against the King and to refuse his rightful reign over us. Paul reminds believers in Ephesians 2, “We all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (vv. 1-3). The title of today’s message is:

***To Hell in a Handbasket:
The Catastrophic Course of Humanity***
Romans 1:24-32

Please turn to Romans chapter one. It’s on page 883 in our *new* pew Bibles, which are the English Standard Version – the same version I’m using. So that will make it easier for you to follow along. I’ll start reading in verse 16 so that we can see why the sins of humanity made the gospel necessary. Paul writes,

¹⁶ For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

¹⁸ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

¹⁹ For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them.²⁰ For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. ²¹ For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

²² Claiming to be wise, they became fools, ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

²⁴ Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves,²⁵ 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.

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. ³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

- Romans 1:16-32

Lord God, you tell us in Psalm 34 that your eyes are on the righteous, and your ears are attentive to their cry. But your face is against those who do evil. Today as we study your word, awaken our hearts to righteousness. Help us to see our dreadful state apart from your grace. Show us our sin and need for salvation. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Last week I issued a textual forecast, saying that the sunshine of Romans 1:1-17 would be followed by a tropical depression that would set in beginning with Romans 1:18 and would not lift until the end of chapter three. Today we enter into one of the darkest parts of the storm as God reveals his wrath against rebellious humanity.

I want to reiterate that God's wrath is not like our wrath. It is not an ill-tempered, fly-off-the-handle, impulsive kind of rage that we experience on account of our impatience and selfishness. No, God's wrath is holy and refers to his intense hatred toward all sin.

Verse 18 says, "the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men." It's a present reality. Although the final outpouring of God's wrath is yet to come (see Col. 3:5-6), it is already being revealed. How? Through human affairs. "The history of the world is the judgment of the world." In an act of poetic justice,

***God judges sinners by handing them
over to their desires.***

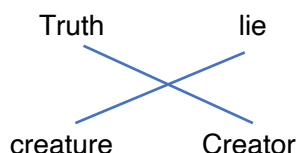
Paul writes in verses 24-25, "Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen."

Whenever you see a "therefore," see what it's *there for*. In this case, Paul is reiterating humanity's rejection of God and God's reaction to their rebellion: "God gave them up..." The expression "God gave them up" is used many times in the Old Testament (LXX) to describe God's handing people over to their enemies. This same language is also used in the New Testament. Jesus predicted his betrayal by Judas, saying, "we are going up to Jerusalem. The Son of Man will be *handed over* to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death" (Matt. 20:18 CSB). Jesus uses the same Greek word (*paradidomi*) that Paul does in Romans 1:24, when he says, "God gave them up...."

This indicates more than a passive, “hands off” approach by God. Rather, he purposely hands people over to the sins that they crave to commit.

Think of a boat caught in the current of the Niagara River, headed for a fateful plunge over the Falls. God “does not simply let go of the boat; he confirms its disastrous course downstream.”¹ God reacts to people’s rebellion by handing them over to their desires. This leads to an ever-increasing cycle of sin and to eventual destruction.

The catastrophic course of humanity began with the worst trade in world history: “*they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator....*”



Scripture says not only that God is true (John 3:33) but also that God is “the truth” (John 14:6). Scripture also refers to an idol – anything we treasure more than God – as “a lie” (Isa. 44:20). Paul says they exchanged the truth about God for “a lie” – literally, “*the lie.*” The lie is that the creature, rather than the Creator, is supreme.

This lie led to horrific consequences. Paul charts the “catastrophic course of humanity” throughout the rest of the chapter. Three times he emphasizes humanity’s rejection of God, saying, “they exchanged ... they exchanged ... they exchanged (vv. 23, 25, 27). And three times Paul underscores God’s reaction to them, saying, “God gave them up ... God gave them up ... God gave them up” (vv. 24, 26, 28).

1. God gave them up to *moral filthiness*.

That’s what the word “impurity” in verse 24 means, especially in relation to sexual sin – “the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves.” The word “dishonor” means to treat with indignity, to cheapen or debase. “God gave them up in “*the lusts of their hearts* to impurity.” God handed them over to their desires and the resulting consequences.

Keep in mind that the fundamental sin is not immorality but idolatry – the failure to honor him, give thanks to him, and live in a way that pleases him. From this fundamental sin flows every other sin, including sexual sin. *Idolatry* leads to *immorality* (1 Cor. 10:6-8).

In Ephesians 4, Paul parallels what he says in Romans 1 about the unregenerate:

They are darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them and because of the hardness of their hearts. They became callous and *gave themselves over* to promiscuity for the practice of every kind of impurity with a desire for more and more.

– Ephesians 4:18-19 CSB

¹ Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*. The NIV Application Commentary, gen. ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), p. 61.

Isn't it interesting that in Ephesians 4, Paul says "they ... gave themselves over," whereas in Romans 1 he says, "God gave them over...." There's no contradiction here. God judges sinners by handing them over to their evil desires.

At the end of verse 25, Paul interjects a sudden word of praise for the Creator, saying, "who is blessed forever! Amen." Like a man who's desperate to come up for air, Paul arises from the muck of humanity's moral filthiness to ascribe glory to God. We can imagine him taking a deep breath before submerging back into this dreadful subject.

2. God gave them up to *homosexual relations*.

In verses 26-27, Paul moves beyond sexual sin in general to homosexual sin in particular:

²⁶ For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; ²⁷ and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

If God condemns all sexual sin, why does Paul call out homosexuality in particular? The reason is that homosexuality illustrates how idolatry goes against God's design for humanity. God's workmanship is marvelous. In his infinite wisdom and power, the Lord God fashioned us just the way he wanted us. That includes our male and female parts. God designed them for the purpose of a husband and wife becoming one flesh and producing godly offspring. In the same way, God designed our entire being – body, mind, soul and spirit – to worship him and walk in fellowship with him. But idolatry, like homosexuality, goes completely against God's creative design. It perverts it.

In verses 26-27, Paul uses unusual Greek words for "women" and "men." They are the same words that are used in the Greek translation of Genesis 1:27, which says,

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him;
male and *female* he created them.

- Genesis 1:27

Jesus also uses these same words in Matthew 19:4 when quoting Genesis 1:27. He says, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them *male* and *female*...?" Likewise, Jesus says in Mark 10:6: "from the beginning God made them *male* and *female*." The terms "male" and "female" emphasize their *sexual distinctiveness*.

But humanity rebelled against God by "exchang[ing] natural relations for those that are contrary to nature" (v. 26). The word "nature" refers to the way men and women were biologically created. The word "relations" [*chresis*] refers to function or manner of using. So "natural relations" have nothing to do with sexual orientation, i.e., what "feels natural" to a person. Rather, it has to do with men and women using their sexual organs in the way that God intended when he created them male and female.

In verse 27, Paul talks about men being "consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for

their error.” We must not think of “error” as a mere mistake or blunder. The well-known New Testament Greek scholar Charles Cranfield points out that the Greek term (*plane*) refers to “a thoroughly serious going astray from the truth in thought and/or in conduct.”²

What is the “due penalty” they “receiv[e] in themselves”? Some think it’s HIV or AIDS. That may be true, but that’s not all. According to the CDC, suicide is the second leading cause of death among people ages 10 to 34 in the United States. Attempted suicides among LGB youth were nearly quadruple what they were among heterosexual youth.³

Many secular websites has suggested that the mental health problems plaguing the LGBT community are due to negative attitudes and cultural stigma. Yet our culture has never been more accepting of so-called “alternative lifestyles.”

- In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court declared same-sex marriage legal in all fifty states.
- In 2016, Caitlyn Jenner (formerly Bruce Jenner) posed on the cover of Sports Illustrated with the gold medal he won in the 1976 Olympics.
- Earlier this year, the first transgender athlete won an Olympic gold medal, being just one of over 180 openly queer athletes participating in the Tokyo Games.
- Last year Pete Buttigieg made history by becoming the first openly gay Democratic presidential candidate.
- A historic number of LGBTQ people have been elected to our present Congress.

Nowadays it’s cool to be queer. The majority of Americans support gay rights, and a growing percentage of the U.S. population identifies as LGBT.⁴ Nevertheless, the LGBT community continues to suffer from depression, self-acceptance, and gender dysphoria. Why? Because they are “receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.” “There is no peace,” says the Lord, “for the wicked” (Isaiah 48:22).

But this is not just a “homosexual problem.” This is *humanity’s* problem. In verses 28-32, Paul presents a whole catalog of sins that plague humanity because of a depraved mind.

3. God gave them up to a *depraved mind*.

²⁸ And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. ²⁹ They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, ³⁰ slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, ³¹ foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.³² Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

- Romans 1:28-32

² C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans 1-8*. The International Critical Commentary, gen. eds. G. I. Davies and C. M. Tuckett (London and New York: T&T Clark Ltd, 1975), p. 127.

³ Michael Kerr, “Depression in the LGBTQIA+ Population.” Healthline, 14 June 2021 [online]. Retrieved on 2 October 2021 at <https://www.healthline.com/health/depression/gay>.

⁴ Samantha Schmidt, “1 in 6 Gen Z adults are LGBT. And this number could continue to grow.” The Washington Post, 24 February 2021 [online]. Retrieved on 2 October 2021 at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2021/02/24/gen-z-lgbt/>.

One commentator describes this section, saying, “Sin tumbles over sin with dizzying speed and the human desire to rebel against God seems to be the only unifying principle of their otherwise chaotic activity.”⁵ Verse 28 says, “they did not see fit to acknowledge God, so God gave them up to a debased mind.” Paul uses a play on words to make his point. In the Greek, the words “not fit” and “debased” come from the same root which means “worth.” So Paul basically says, “Since they thought acknowledging God was worthless, God gave them up to a worthless mind.”

This led to an ever-worsening cycle of sin. Notice the progression. First Paul says, “They *were filled* with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice.” The word “filled” [pleroo] means “to pervade with influence, to possess fully.” No matter how much they have, they want more. They’re never satisfied with their sin.

Then Paul says, “They are *full* of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.” They go from being “filled” to becoming “full.” The word full [mestos] means replete, to be stuffed or gorged with food and drink.” That’s the word God uses to describe sinful humanity. “They are full of envy” – always wanting what other people have. Envy often leads to “murder” – like when Cain slew Abel and when the religious leaders demanded that Jesus be crucified. They did so out of envy and murdered the Son of God. “Strife, deceit, [and] maliciousness” all have to do with human conflict and the desire to hurt one another.

Being “filled” with sin led to their becoming “full” of sin, which then becomes their whole identity. They are sinners through-and-through. Paul says, “They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (vv. 29b-31). We don’t have time to discuss this list in detail. But let’s linger for just a moment on this wide-ranging depiction of human sin.

- “Gossips” and “slanderers” are “people who go about to destroy other people’s reputations by misrepresentation.”⁶ Gossips do so secretly, slanderers openly.
- The next six sins describe what Tom Schreiner calls “the shocking depth of evil.”⁷
 - “Haters of God”: That sounds a bit over-the-top. Most people would not refer to themselves as “haters of God.” But that’s exactly what you are if you love and refuse to leave your sin. Paul expounds on this in chapter 8, saying, “For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot” (Rom. 8:7) – because it’s dominated by sin and self. This leads to the next three terrible traits:
 - “insolent, haughty, boastful”: This trio of vices are all connected in that they point to the pride, arrogance and rudeness “of those who are convinced of their own superiority.”⁸

⁵ Frank S. Thielman, *Romans*. Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018). Cited by Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*. Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, second edition, eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018), p. 106.

⁶ Cranfield, 130-131.

⁷ Schreiner, 107.

⁸ Ibid.

- “inventors of evil”: they use their creativity to think up new, innovative ways to commit sin. The Business Insider news website refers to pornography as “the hidden engine that drives innovation in tech[nology].”⁹ Digital fraud is also becoming more sophisticated as technology advances.¹⁰ Humans use their God-given creativity to commit in new ways the very things God hates.
- “disobedient to parents”: Sin ruptures family relationships. Instead of doing what’s right, children rebel against their parents’ authority, thereby showing their defiance toward God, who said, “Honor your father and your mother” (Exodus 20:12). Parents exacerbate the problem by refusing to discipline their children or by frustrating them “with no-win scenarios” (Eph. 6:4 MSG).
- Paul ends the list with rhetorical force, naming four sins that all begin and end with the same letters in Greek: “foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless.” “Foolish” means reckless, “faithless” means unable to be trusted, “heartless” means devoid of natural or instinctive affection – like love of family, and “ruthless” means unmerciful, uncompassionate, cruel.¹¹

Committing such evil is bad enough. But Paul concludes the chapter by saying that sin is not only committed but also celebrated. Verse 32 says, “Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.”

Sometimes people wonder why God allows so much evil in the world. This text answers that question partly by saying, “Instead of blaming God, take a good look at yourselves.”

***God judges sinners by handing them
over to their desires.***

The Puritan Thomas Watson said,

**“Until sin is bitter,
Christ will not be sweet.”**

This passage shows us why the gospel is necessary. Unless God’s grace intervenes, all of humanity is headed for hell in a handbasket. But thankfully God in his grace did intervene. “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). When Jesus died on the cross, God treated his perfectly righteous Son as if he had committed all these evils instead of us. Jesus voluntarily took the punishment that we deserved so that we could get off the road that leads to destruction and on to the road that leads to eternal life. “The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell, it goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell.” Despite your

⁹ Ross Benes, “PORN: The Hidden Engine That Drives Innovation in Tech.” Business Insider, 5 July 2013 [online]. Retrieved on 2 October 2021 at <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-porn-drives-innovation-in-tech-2013-7>.

¹⁰ “How Is Digital Fraud Becoming More Sophisticated As Technology Advances?” Forbes, 16 September 2019 [online]. Retrieved on 2 October 2021 at <https://www.forbes.com/sites/quora/2019/09/16/how-is-digital-fraud-becoming-more-sophisticated-as-technology-advances/?sh=51edb38e4e84>.

¹¹ My wife reminded me of an incident several years ago that demonstrated this vice. A family had lost their teenage son to brain cancer. Sometime later his younger brother was in a soccer game playing against another woman’s son and annoying him. The mother sarcastically whispered, “What are the chances of him getting what his brother got?” Despite claiming to be a Christian, this woman was cruel.

countless transgressions against God, he will wash away your sins and give you the free gift of his righteousness, if you will repent of your sin and trust Jesus to save you.

Believers, there are a few points of application that we can take away from this text as well. Three specific areas come to mind:

- **Our worthiness** – I think it was Jerry Bridges who wrote, “Our good days are never so good that we are beyond the *need* of God’s grace, and our bad days are never so bad that we’re beyond the *reach* of God’s grace.” What makes you worthy is not your performance, but God’s provision.
- **Our witness** – Don’t condone what God condemns. The Lord declared through his prophet Isaiah, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness...” (5:20). Remember what we read earlier from Ephesians 5: “Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them” (v. 11). “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light...” (v. 8).
- **Our worship** – Jesus taught that whoever is forgiven little loves little, but whoever is forgiven much loves much. The more we understand the depth of our depravity, the more we will love the Lord who has shown us such astounding mercy and grace. “Therefore, let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to his name” (Heb. 13:15 NLT).