

Romans, Part 7 5-22-22

The Descent of Man

We are once again focusing on the last portion of Romans one. If you have missed the last few messages, please, please avail yourself of the recordings online. These may have been among the most important I have ever given. Today's is no exception as we examine what Paul says in this passage about the descent of man, the plummeting of our race into ruin. It is a profound teaching and one that explains so very much about our society that no one, apart from Scripture, can truly understand. Romans 1:18-32 *For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,* ¹⁹*because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them.* ²⁰*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.* ²¹*For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened.* ²²*Professing to be wise, they became fools,* ²³*and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.* ²⁴*Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them.* ²⁵*For they exchanged the truth of 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 over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,* ²⁷*and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.* ²⁸*And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper,* ²⁹*being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,* ³⁰*slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,* ³¹*without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful;* ³²*and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.*

Two Sundays back we looked at wrath and reprobation – at how God’s judgment on human rebellion is to simply let us have our way. He gives societies and individuals over, abandons them to, their wicked choices and desires. Verses 24, 26 and 28 all use this language. Paul sees the degradation of human society from a theological viewpoint. God is a major part of the picture. And He, in His righteous displeasure, removes His merciful restraints and allows us to tumble into pits of debasement and shame. We are given over by God because we rejected Him. Despite knowing Him, we repudiated Him. Instead of living in gratitude we denounced Him. Refusing to walk in His purposes, according to His laws, for His glory, we made our own way, determined our own rules and advanced our own fame. How did that work out?

Today we indulge in a more detailed look at how it worked out, at how our reprobation manifests in our practice, in our psychology and our sociology. Let’s look at the descent of man in eight stages – ending in a rather surprising place.

Stage number one of the descent of man is futility. Futility. They became futile in their speculations. It reminds me of all the attempts of scientist to create life. This has gone on since before Frankenstein and we are not an inch closer to doing it. It is a futile endeavor. It is like jumping out of an airplane and trying to knit a parachute on the way down. So, I come here today to teach on futility – but, what’s the point? That was a joke. *Futile* means pointless. This is the world without God, without purpose. Ephesians 4:17 says the Gentiles before Christ walked for centuries in the *futility of their minds*. Woody Allen says - “*Life is full of misery, loneliness, and suffering - and it's all over much too soon.*” There you go. Bertrand Russell said: *Only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built. There is no splendor, no vastness anywhere, only triviality for a moment and then nothing. Brief and powerless is man’s life; on him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark.* Those who aren’t paid to be philosophers don’t say this stuff out loud. It doesn’t make them popular at funerals and weddings, but it is indeed how most humans view the matter, although they pretend otherwise. Christianity bursts on the scene with news of a God who made us for His glory, who redeemed us to be His ambassadors and worshipers, who will take us to Himself on the last day. Our message blows away futility and fills life with meaning, with destiny, with, well – life! Peter says that by the blood of Jesus we who believe have been redeemed from the futile way of life that we inherited from our forefathers. But, apart from Christ, everyone is living in Futileburgh.

And, what is the weather like in Futilityburgh? It is cold and dark. Dark – that is our second stage of descent – into the darkness. You can't see in the dark. That's the point. II Corinthians 4 says that Satan has blinded the minds of the unbelieving. The darkness metaphor is all over in Scripture. At Christmas we read Isaiah about those who walked in darkness seeing a great light. Colossians says we have been rescued from the power of darkness. Ephesians says you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Our hymns are full of this theme and I Peter 2:9 says you who believe have been called out of darkness into God's marvelous light. Without this profound, life-changing calling we live in darkness. We lack understanding. We are ignorant. But, as Romans one makes plain, this is a willing ignorance. Sometimes, when I watch a sporting event and a player gets injured I choose not to watch the replay. I watch sports for pleasure – and it pains me to see a serious injury, so I turn away. I am willingly blind to the injury. You know what I mean? That is what folks do with the gospel. Beth and I were reading Luke 8 about Jesus going to the Gerasenes, where He heals a notorious demoniac, with the result being that the Gerasene citizens asked Him to leave. They did not want Him around. The presence of light in their community was too disruptive. *Please go*, they said. John's gospel focuses on this theme – the light comes into the world and the world preferred the darkness. Sometimes, in the morning, I go into our bathroom, look at myself in the mirror and think I look pretty good. Not that many signs of ageing. And then I make the mistake of turning up the lights to shave – and that is when I see the rosacea and the wrinkles and the grey and the splotches that didn't used to be there. I look better in dim lighting, even better in the dark. This is why we prefer it. But it is willing blindness – a choice to be ignorant, and, in the end, we suffer for it, big time.

Our third stage in the descent of man is arrogant ignorance. It is bad enough to be willingly ignorant, but so much worse to be proud of it. Oh my – if we could go back and hear all the things experts confidently told us about Covid. *We got this; we understand this*. Two presidents telling us they were going to blow the virus away. Our most esteemed doctors contradicting themselves from month to month, but always with supreme confidence. This is how the world operates. When I was trained to be a sports official, they taught me that it was okay to be wrong, but never act like you aren't sure. This is the approach of so many to everything. In fact, our tendency is to act most confident about the things we are least sure of. We aren't open to questions, challenges. When you see that attitude, it should really make you wonder. In 2020 and 2021, Facebook and Twitter would ban

comments that contradicted the government and, before you knew it, the government was proclaiming the very thing that had been banned ten minutes earlier. Dangerous disinformation until – well, we couldn't deny it any longer. Romans 1:22 *Professing to be wise, they became fools.*

Our fourth stage in human descent is into idolatry. 1:22-23 *Professing to be wise, they became fools,*²³*and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures.* Verse 25 says they worshiped the creation rather than the creator. Well that is stupid. Isaiah in chapter 44 of his prophecy goes on at length mocking the idolatry of his day. I encourage you to read that passage. It connects spiritual blindness with the idol-making industry. All of this is of a piece. Willing blindness, arrogant ignorance, suppressing the truth. Why not idolatry too? It is all part of a grand exercise in self-delusion. We invent stories to help us cope. So, the Sun-God, so there is Zeus and Baal and Elvis. The obvious forms of idolatry such as Paul describes were popular among the Gentiles of Paul's day. The Jews largely had eradicated them from their religion. But there were other idols, of course. Jesus spoke against the idol of human approval – always doing things to be seen and admired. Paul wrote of the idol of money. Colossians 3:5 (NLT) *Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater.* Ephesians 5:5 (NLT) *A greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world.* Okay, that's the point. What you worship, what you ascribe ultimate worth to, what you believe you must have, that is your idol, your god. We all struggle with this. Even if we put ultimate faith in Jesus, we are prone to look to other things to meet our needs – our abilities, our money, our government, our children. If we think for a bit we realize that all of these will let you down; none of this can truly satisfy. But Lord, our hearts are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love, and slip into idolatrous thoughts and behaviors. One of my favorite paradigms for Christian counseling centers on helping folks identify their idols, those things in which they trust, so they can replace them with Christ. Our devotion to idols leaves us empty, frustrated, angry, depressed. But, when the Lord is our refuge, our strength, our desire – the fruits of the Spirit abound. When Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, look at how he described their conversion – I Thessalonians 1:9 *You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.* But, until that happens, lost men and women are devoting their lives to vain things, to idols that promise them the good life but leave them empty.

On to stage five on the journey of human descent into degradation and shame. This is immorality. Sexual immorality. With rare occasion, the idols that

God-rejectors tend to create, are markedly accepting of their erotic appetites. Curious how that works. There is this interesting synthesis of idolatry and lust. Look at this in I Peter 4:3 (NLT) *You have had enough in the past of the evil things that godless people enjoy—their immorality and lust, their feasting and drunkenness and wild parties, and their terrible worship of idols.* The idolatry is mixed up with the immorality. We need a higher power who approves of our indulgence. Because our sin makes us unable to conform our behavior to God's law we need a different law that accords with our behavior – and that requires a different lawgiver. A king, a culture, a false god, an ethic that makes following your heart the end-all-be-all. *Just follow your heart. Be true to yourself.* We may arrange our religion to accommodate our passions. We see this so clearly in our society these days. Whole denominations decide that certain practices which the church condemned for 2000 years are now - okay. And most of this revolves around the sexual revolution which has been ongoing since at least the 1960s, but has accelerated in this last decade. You know, it is no secret that sexual sin has always been prevalent, even in Christian cultures – at least in the sense of adultery, prostitution, premarital relations. What has changed in my lifetime is the demand that such things be accepted and celebrated, the willingness to do them in the open. All of this is in view when the apostle writes that God gave men over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity.

Quickly then on to stage six, which is the next level down from simple immorality into homosexual immorality. To be clear – any sexual relations outside of monogamous, heterosexual marriage are off-limits – forbidden by God, anti-family and, thus, destructive to the social fabric. Ed Welch says that all of us have a sexual orientation that is against God – at least against the God who made us and dares to tell us how to live. So, we are all guilty here, to some degree. But, homosex goes a step further because it is a practice that is contrary to nature. Now – Paul is saying this, but I think we can all see his point. 26-27 *God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural,²⁷ and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.* He is pointing here to disease – We covered this two Sundays back. This is where Paul chooses to focus as he describes our slide into depravity, but, since we dealt with it already, let's move on.

Stage number seven is all kinds of sin – all kinds of sin. Immorality is the leading actor in this play, but there are plenty more evils in the cast. 29-31 *unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips,* ³⁰*slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents,* ³¹*without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful.* Twenty varieties of human sin noted there with a word or two. We won't get into them except to note that a chaste gossip is living in sin. A faithful wife who is envious and greedy is far from God. The self-righteous husband who has never strayed and thinks himself worthy because of it, is under condemnation. We will not take this list apart, but take a moment to look at it and let the word address your conscience from that list.

Our eighth and final stage of human descent into decadence is found in our last verse. 32 *Although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.* They give hearty approval to those who practice them. They may even have a parade. They may even have a pride month. Hearty approval. There is this general agreement – you don't criticize my thing and I won't criticize yours. About twenty years ago, there was a book that became popular among Christian college students called *Blue Like Jazz*. I found it to sow confusion and error but many loved the author's attack on uptight, legalistic Christians. He actually said that hippy culture was better because even though fornication and drug abuse was rampant, they didn't judge each other. Cool! They loved unconditionally he says, although he offered no stories of anybody getting high and building an orphanage. He just loved the loose, flexible morality, which he equated with love. Giving hearty approval to those who practice things that lead to death. Is there anything that describes our society quite as well as that?

Al Mohler often quotes a British theologian named Theo Hopson who describes the three phases essential to any moral revolution. Hopson says that phase one in the revolution is that what was condemned must be celebrated. What was condemned must be celebrated. I would have added a first stage of being tolerated – but the goal is to have it celebrated. Romans one focuses on homosex and that is one clear example in my lifetime. Just a couple of decades back, homosexuality was regarded as a mental disorder and was against the law in most of our states. Those who engaged, were in the closet. But the goal of the sexual revolution has been to make this conduct acceptable – even celebrated. Yes? The Supreme court and certain states created this thing called “same-sex” marriage.

And, in many contexts, if you won't celebrate such a union you are risking legal trouble yourself. Well, Hopson says the second phase of the revolution requires that what was celebrated must be condemned. What was celebrated must be condemned. What might this be? The nuclear family? Christian morality? The Church? The Bible? Then the third phase, says Hopson, is that those who will not celebrate must be condemned. Oh yes! The elimination of opposing voices. We want hearty approval and if you won't give it to us we will sue you, cancel you, boycott you. We will allow no prophetic voices in our society calling us to an old-fashioned, Scriptural morality. YouTube will demonetize you. Facebook will censor you. Twitter will deplatform you, your company will send you packing if you won't put a rainbow over your office door.

This is Jack Philips. This is Barronelle Stutzman. Barronelle was sued by the ACLU and the state of Washington because she told a homosexual couple that she could not, in good conscience, serve them as a floral designer for their wedding. Jack, a baker, made the same decision with regard to designing and creating a cake for such an occasion. The state of Colorado put him out of business with incredible fines. What did Jack and Barronelle do wrong? Failure to celebrate. You see, if you turn verse 32 around you see the implications for those of us of Biblical conscience. They give hearty approval to those who practice shameful things and therefore, they adamantly oppose those who will neither practice nor approve. I hope that is you. And where we must not practice or approve – I pray we express ourselves gently, kindly, lovingly as we stand together for the truth, for the pure, for the good - as our Lord defines these things.

So, the challenge is here for us to recognize what is happening in our increasingly post-Christian society, to grieve it, to expose it, to stand against it and to not be drawn into it. The pressure for us and even more, for our kids, will be enormous. We must stand with Jesus, we must stand with Paul, we must stand with Luther who courageously faced the cancel mob of his day, one that threatened his very life and said, *Unless I am convinced by either the Scriptures or right reason, for my conscience is held captive by the word of God, I cannot and will not recant for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Here I stand, I can do no other.* In 2022, brethren, it is our time to stand, with confidence that our God, like Luther's God, is a mighty fortress. And because we believe that, we will *Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill: God's truth abideth still, His Kingdom is forever.*

The challenge is also to live in hope as we remember that Romans 1 presents such a bleak, dark picture in order to set the backdrop for the blazing light of the gospel that is coming. In a mere seven chapters we will read that in Christ we are super-conquerors through him who loved us and gave his life for our pardon and his Spirit for our cleansing. Romans five tells us that where sin abounded, grace did much more abound. So, *Praise the Lord, His mercy is more. Stronger than darkness, new every morn. Our sins they are many, His mercy is more.*