

The Result of Sin

Romans 1:28-32

Grady Nutt, once said, "I grew up in a Baptist church so I learned about sin from the experts."

The 30th American president, Calvin Coolidge was known for being a man of few words. After returning from church one day, his wife is supposed to have asked him, "What did the preacher talk about?" Mr. Coolidge replied, "Sin." Mrs. Coolidge prodded him, "Well, what did he say about sin?" Coolidge responded, "He was against it."

We are studying the apostle Paul's penetrating analysis of sin that runs from Romans 1:18 through 3:20. He is showing why all people need the gospel (1:16-17), no matter how good they may seem outwardly, namely, because all have sinned. God's only solution for the devastating effects of sin on the human race is the gospel, that Christ died for our sins and that He gives His righteousness to all who believe in Him.

Verse 18 tells us why this gospel of the gift of God's righteousness is so desperately needed: **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness."** We need the righteousness of God by faith because of God's wrath, His righteous judgment, against our ungodliness and unrighteousness. People are ungodly and unrighteous because they suppress the truth about God.

So in the rest of chapter 1 Paul describes the effects of suppressing the truth of God. All the evil of the world has its source here. Reject God, suppress God, distort God, recreate God in your own image, and God gives us up to go further into the sin we have chosen.

We've seen it three times. In verse 23, we exchange the glory of God for images, and verse 24 says, **"Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts..."** In verse 25, we exchange the truth about God for a lie, and verse 26 says, **"For this reason God gave them up to vile passions."** And today in verse 28 we see it again: **"And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, [therefore] God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting."**

This is what Paul means by the wrath of God being revealed (verse 18): God's wrath is being revealed against the world, as people set their affections on other things more than on God. God responds to this rebellion against our Creator by giving us up to ourselves, sentencing us to sink deeper into the cesspool of our own sin.

We have already seen in the last two weeks how God gave people over to sexual immorality and homosexuality. And if Paul had stopped after verses 24-25, some might think, "That's right Preacher! Hit all those sexually immoral people!" And, if he had stopped after verses 26-27, many more could say, "Yes, Paul—give it to those homosexuals! They need to hear about God's judgment on their sin."

But Paul doesn't stop there! He goes on in verses 29-31 to catalog 21 different sinful attitudes and actions. Together these practices describe the breakdown of human community as standards disappear, society and healthy social relationships begin to disintegrate.

Let's listen to God's word, Romans 1:28-32:

- 28 And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting;**
- 29 being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers,**
- 30 backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents,**
- 31 undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful;**
- 32 who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.**

Paul traces four steps in the downward spiral of sin in these verses:

(1). Sin begins when we reject God as unworthy (1:28).

“And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge ...” Who is “they”? “They” is people, human beings like you and me. It means the entire human race after the fall. On another level, it refers to whole societies and civilizations that have turned their backs on God. But even more personally, it applies to individuals who chose to turn away from God.

The phrase “did not like to retain God” translates from a word that means to approve by testing. It was used of testing metals like gold to see if they were genuine. So Paul means that people tested God and concluded, “He’s not real” or “He’s not important.” And so they rejected God.

People still reject God today. Maybe they prayed and asked God to spare the life of a loved one, but that person died. Maybe they asked Him to deliver them from some problem, but things only got worse. Maybe they wanted their way more than God’s way. So they shut God out of their lives.

People who do this are sitting in judgment on God. It is like they put God on trial and they determined that He is unworthy to be God. They thought, “If God is like that, then I don’t want to know Him.” So they cast God aside like fool’s gold.

That is always the first step in sin: Rather than submit to God by obedience to His Word and by persevering through trials, we turn our backs on Him. We decide that we know better than He does about how to be happy. So we move ahead without God.

(2). Sin intensifies as God gives us over to debased minds (1:28).

“God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting.” As we have already seen in the last two weeks, God lifts His restraining hand and gives sinners a gentle push out the door, saying, “If you want to sin, go for it!” Sin is its own punishment, as we will see again in verses 29-31.

The word for a debased mind is related to the word Paul used earlier in the verse about men not liking to retain God in their knowledge. Just as sinners tested God and rejected Him, so God gave them over to minds that were tested and found corrupt. They did not approve to have God in their knowledge, so God gave them over to a mind disapproved by Him.” Our minds become more and more defective in sin. Not only do we use them to sin, but we can’t even think clearly about sin. We can’t recognize it.

All sin begins in the heart. Jesus said (Mark 7:21-23), **“For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts,**

covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within and defile a man.” Jesus’ list of sins overlaps with Paul’s list here. The point is, sin warps our thinking so that we do not see it from God’s perspective. We begin to think that sin is not so bad, because it will get us what we really want in life. So we rationalize our sin. Our debased mind can think of all kinds of reasons to justify our sin.

For example, maybe you start thinking, “I deserve a better husband than this lazy, uncaring man that I live with. I’m a good woman. I’ve treated him right, but all I get is grief.” At this point, in your mind you are not acknowledging God and His Word, which tells you respect your husband and to seek his good over your own. When you ignore God and His word, you’re a sitting duck for Satan to bring along a kind, understanding man at work. He’s looking for a good woman just like you! So you fall into adultery and divorce. It started in your heart and was intensified in your mind.

Our mind is so deceptive in justifying the sinful thoughts of our heart. Our minds will rationalize stealing: “It’s okay to fudge on this tax form, the government is corrupt anyway.” We can rationalize anger and malice, “They deserve it for what they did to me.” We can justify greed and envy, “I deserve those things more than they do.”

So sin begins when we deliberately shut God out of our lives. It intensifies when God gives us over to depraved, spiritually unfit minds.

(3). Sin shows up in way that damage relationships (1:29-31).

Look at the terrible list in these verses. What is this list of evils? What are we to make of this long list and why is it here?

Paul is showing that the human race is guilty of sin in thought, word and deed. The list doesn’t cover every conceivable sin. It contains examples of relationally destructive sins. When we practice them, our families and our entire society suffer.

Of course we know as well as Paul did that not every person, or even every unbeliever is completely like this terrible list. Some are very conscientious, law-abiding, philanthropic, courteous, decent people.

The point of this list is not to say that every person or society which rejects God will be as bad as they possibly can be. Not every person has all these sins in the same measure. These are samples. They are the sort of thing that comes from rejecting God, and the more God gives a people up to their own unrestrained depravity, the more their society will have these sins in greater and greater measure.

Let’s look briefly at these sins. The first four terms come under the description, “**being filled with,**” and are general words for sin: “unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, and evil.”

“Unrighteousness”—is a general term for sin. William Barclay says that this word refers to “the man who robs both man and God of their rights. He worships himself.”

“Wickedness”—This word often is used to describe Satan, the evil one, “who deliberately attacks and aims to destroy the goodness of men.” It refers to “the active, deliberate will to corrupt and to inflict injury” (Barclay).

“covetousness”— this is greed which “means the inordinate desire to have more. It is selfishness unlimited.... with a complete disregard of the effect on other people.” (Morris, p. 96).

“maliciousness”—this word means evil. It “is the most general Greek word for badness. It describes the case of a man who is destitute of every quality which would make him good” (Barclay, p. 35). The scale of his life has tipped toward the worse.

Then Paul says, “full of,” followed by five terms. This indicates that these sinners did not just have a slight tendency or inclination towards these sins.

“Envy”—Envy is the attitude that wants to deprive the others of the desired thing more than to gain it for oneself. The envious person despises people for who they are and what they have.

“Murder”—Jesus extended this sin to being angry with someone else (Matt. 5:21-22). So the seeds of murder lie in all of our hearts.

“Strife”—is “the contention which is born of envy, ambition, the desire for prestige, and place and prominence” (Barclay, p. 35). All of these sins stem from selfishness.

“Deceit”—is the word used for bait for fishing. It refers to any deliberate attempt to mislead someone for your own advantage.

“evil-mindedness”—or malice, it is “conscious and intentional wickedness” (Morris, p. 97, citing TDNT, 3:485). Aristotle defined it as “the spirit which always supposes the worst about other people” (Barclay, p. 36).

“whisperers”—Gossips are people who secretly spread malicious stories about others behind their backs.

“backbiters”—These are Slanderers, someone who openly speaks evil against someone, intending to hurt his reputation.

“Haters of God”—This is the one term directly aimed at God, not at others. He sees God as “the barrier between him and his pleasures” (Barclay, p. 37). God is out to spoil his fun. But it affects too our relationships with others. If we hate God we will also end up hating people.

“Violent”—or insolent, “refers to a lofty sense of superiority out of which the insolent person treats all others as beneath him” (Morris, pp. 97-98). It makes him cruel and insulting (Barclay, p. 37).

“Proud”—is the word used three times in Scripture when it says that “God opposes the proud” (Prov. 3:34; James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). It refers to an arrogant man who has “a certain contempt for everyone” except himself (Barclay, p. 37).

“Boasters”—came from a word meaning “wandering.” It referred to wandering merchants who would make extravagant claims for their products that could not be substantiated (Morris, p. 98).

“Inventors of evil things”—are not content with usual ways of sinning, so they invent new, outrageous sins that push the limit.

“Disobedient to parents”—This sin strikes at the heart of family solidarity. “It implies a lack of gratitude and a contempt for family authority” (Morris, p. 98).

The last four words in this group (1:31) all show what is lacking in the sinner’s life:

“Undiscerning”—refers to those who act stupidly, especially in the moral realm. They do not fear God, which is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10).

“Untrustworthy”—refers to those who break covenants. They don’t keep their word. They don’t do what they promise and then they make up excuses for why they didn’t do it.

“Unloving”—means “without natural affection.” It refers to parents who do not love their children or to children who hate their parents or to brothers and sisters who fight with each other.

“Unmerciful”—refers to someone lacking compassion and kindness for others. Morris says (p. 99), “This is the very depth of evil. The person who shows no mercy can scarcely go lower.”

So what's the point of listing all these sins? The point, I think, is to give us enough examples to show that virtually every form of evil ultimately has to do with God and comes from failing to know him and approve him and love him above all things. That's the point of this list. Wherever we are sinking in sin, it is because we have jumped off the solid rock of the glory of God.

But we haven't hit bottom yet! Paul adds one more point:

(4). Sin culminates in people approving of it. (1:32).

Paul concludes in verse 32, **“who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them.”**

What a description of our society! People know God's moral standards through conscience or a general sense of right and wrong. They know the command of God that sinners deserve death. But still, they thumb their noses at God as they revel in their sin. And they're happy to see others sinning. It helps ease their guilt.

The whole “gay pride” movement is a flagrant example of those who not only engage in sin privately, but openly boast of it and encourage others to do it. Ashley Madison was created to encourage people to commit adultery. We encourage our children to sinful pride by feeding their egos and selfishness. This is where we are as a society.

John Piper describes it this way: “the end-point of depravity is not just the suicidal love affair with sin, but the desire to bring others with you to destruction. It's not just that people choose death for themselves in the passion of sin, but that they become Dr. Kevorkians at the spiritual level, and assist others in eternal self-destruction by approving their sin.”

32 takes us back to verses 18-19 and teaches us that everyone not only knows God, but also knows some of the moral demands of God and what disobedience deserves. Then verse 32 adds that everyone knows not only that God exists and is eternal and powerful and glorious and beneficent, but also that God has a “righteous ordinance,” that the sins of verses 29-31 deserve the punishment of death. Everyone, Paul says, knows this.

Not that everyone you talk to will necessarily admit that he or she knows this. But you come to them with the tremendous (Biblical) confidence that you are not starting from scratch in establishing the truth in their soul. They are not blank tablets. They may have buried it, distorted it, hidden it, drugged it, run from it by overwork or excessive play and entertainment; but you know it is there.

Conclusion

The danger of these lists of sin is that we read them and think, “I've got my faults, but thank God I'm not that bad!” But these verses should cause us all to examine our hearts and to fear sinning.

If all we had were these verses, it would be a hopeless and depressing picture. We can try to pass legislation to promote morality, but laws are of limited value in restraining

evil. The sins in these verses go down to the heart level; so we need a heart solution. The only solution is the gospel that changes our hearts (1:16-17). God's wrath is against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men (1:18), but, thank God, Christ came to die for the ungodly and unrighteous (Rom. 4:5; 5:6-8)! Romans 1:18-32 shows that God's wrath against our sin is justified. We all deserve His judgment.

But the good news is that God has provided the righteousness we need in Jesus Christ (1:17; 3:21-26). And, this gift of righteousness is not given to those who try really hard, but rather to those who trust in Christ.

Have you trusted in Jesus Christ to save you from God's wrath?