

When God Lets Go

Romans 1:24-32

In our verse-by-verse study of Paul's letter to the Romans, we now come Romans 1:24-32. I will not try to teach all nine of these verses today, but I hope to give you a framework for us to understand what Paul is saying to us in this powerfully relevant passage.

Some years ago Pastor Walter Luthi of Berne, Switzerland, was preaching to his congregation on Romans 1:24-32. He began his message this way: *"In the words that we have just read we are told the whole truth about our condition. There may well be people among us who cannot bear to hear the truth, and would like to creep quietly away out of the church. Let them do so if they wish."*

Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse called this the most terrible passage in all the Bible. That is an astonishing statement, considering how much of the Bible deals with mankind's sin and God's judgment.

Paul is showing how the wrath of God is being **"revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness"** (1:18). We saw last time the five step rejection of God and His truth in verses 18-23. It starts with people who know God but who refuse to worship Him by giving Him glory and being thankful to Him. This neglect led to speculation: their thinking became futile. This leads to a moral blindness: their foolish hearts were darkened. When people have suppressed their knowledge of God they inevitably turn to idolatry. Human beings were made by God to worship, to glorify Him. If we reject God and refuse to worship Him, we will end up worshiping ourselves or something else. This is why God's wrath is revealed against men. We are under His just judgment.

Our passage today shows us that one aspect of God's wrath is to give sinners over to their lusts, so that they experience the inevitable, horrible consequences of sin. That is to say, sin itself drives us further into sin. Sin becomes its own punishment! People think that sin will bring them fulfillment and happiness. It may feel good in the short run. But God has designed His moral laws so that if you break them individually or if a society casts them off collectively, those laws turn around and break you! It's like the law of gravity: you can break it, but then it breaks you.

Listen as I read the word of God from Romans 1:18-32:

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

19 because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them.

20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse,

21 because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

22 Professing to be wise, they became fools,

23 and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things.

24 Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves,

25 who exchanged the truth of God for the 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 vile passions. For even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature.

27 Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful, and receiving in themselves the penalty of their error which was due.

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.

Let us pray:

In this passage Paul is saying (1) The primary sin that incurs God's wrath is to reject the truth of God and to worship the creature rather than the Creator (1:25). (2) When people reject God, He gives them over to their sins and the horrible consequences of that sin (1:24, 26-32).

Three times in this passage Paul repeats a three-fold sequence of thought. It is easy to recognize in the text because of the phrase Paul uses three times in this section. You see it in verse 24, "**God also gave them up to uncleanness,**" in verse 26, "**God gave them up to vile passions,**" and in verse 28, "**God gave them over to a debased mind.**" First, God gave them over to impurity so that they dishonored their bodies; second, He gave them over degrading passions illustrated by homosexuality; and third He gave them over to a depraved mind, expressed in all sorts of socially destructive sins.

This passage, then, describes the downward progress of the human race as it steadily moves away from God. Each step takes man further away from God and deeper into moral depravity. The key to this passage is that three-fold phrase—"God gave them over." Each time it is repeated, it describes a further stage in man's turning away from God. Stage 1 is bad, Stage 2 worse, Stage 3 worse still. In the end people have turned all moral values upside down.

God lets go. He gives them up that is God's wrath revealed. That is the consequence of a life or a world that rejects God. We see this same pattern throughout the Bible.

In Psalm 81 laments how it happened to the people of Israel:

8 "Hear, O My people, and I will admonish you! O Israel, if you will listen to Me!

9 There shall be no foreign god among you; Nor shall you worship any foreign god.

10 I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt; Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.

11 "But My people would not heed My voice, And Israel would have none of Me.

12 So I gave them over to their own stubborn heart, To walk in their own counsels.

God says they would have none of Me so I gave them up.

In Hosea, the prophet comes to the same conclusion. Hosea 4:17 says Ephraim, that's another name for the nation of Israel, "**Ephraim is joined to idols, Let him alone.**" God lets go of His wayward people.

In Matthew 15 Jesus' disciples ask Him about the Pharisees, whom He has offended by His teaching. In verse 14 Jesus answers, " **Let them alone. They are blind leaders of the blind. And if the blind leads the blind, both will fall into a ditch.**" Let them alone. Let them go. That's what God has done.

In Acts 7 before Stephen is martyred he preaches Jesus by summarizing the history of Israel. When he gets to the episode Israel worshiping the golden calf he says in 7:42, "**Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven.**" God gave them up, let them go.

This is what God does with people who reject Him. In Acts 14 Paul is horrified that after God healed a man through Paul the people of Lystra turned to worship Paul and Barnabas. Paul responds in 14:15-16 by saying, "**Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men with the same nature as you, and preach to you that you should turn from these useless things to the living God, who made the heaven, the earth, the sea, and all things that are in them, who in bygone generations allowed all nations to walk in their own ways.**" Did you hear it there? God let the nations walk in their own ways.

When people suppress the truth and reject God there is a point at which God lets them go. God gives them up. Before the flood in Genesis 6:3 God said, "**My Spirit shall not strive with man forever.**" There comes a point when God gives them up, when God lets go.

What is the judgment of God when men turn away from him? God "gives them up" to their own devices. He lets them follow their own desires. He doesn't try to stop their meteoric descent into the abyss.

This does not in any way imply that God causes people to sin. But neither is God merely passive. Rather, as one commentator says, "He positively withdrew His hand; He ceased to hold the boat as it was dragged by the current of the river," (Frederic Godet, Commentary on Romans [Kregel], p. 107). Another preacher goes a bit farther: "God does not simply let the boat go—he gives it a push downstream," (Douglas Moo, The Epistle to the Romans [Eerdmans], p. 111).

Parents sometimes get to this point with a rebellious child. You say, "Do what you want and you will pay the consequences of your actions." Maybe he threatens to run away and you help him carry his duffel bag out the door. The father of the prodigal son did this with the boy's outrageous request to get his share of the inheritance before the

father's death. He gave him what he wanted, and let him squander it all and end up in the pigsty.

Here in verse 24 Paul says that God gave them first over to uncleanness, **"Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves."**

Paul is referring to sexual immorality. God designed sex as a good gift, but He clearly commands that it be restricted to monogamous, heterosexual marriages. In that context, the sexual union glorifies God as it expresses exclusive love between a man and a woman and is an earthly picture of the relationship between Christ and His church (Eph. 5:31-32).

Outside of that context, if we engage in sexual behavior, we dishonor our bodies and defile ourselves with uncleanness, a word used of decaying matter, like the contents of a grave.

Sexual lust begins in the heart (Mark 7:21-23). If we do not judge lustful thoughts on the heart level, sooner or later we will face the temptation to involve our bodies. Does it feel good at the moment? Yes, of course, otherwise we wouldn't do it. But it leads to your being enslaved by sin. Since sex outside of marriage is outside of the context for which God designed it, it never completely satisfies. It leaves you empty and broken.

It is serious what is in our hearts and what we do with our bodies. Paul says that if a man joins himself to a prostitute, he becomes one flesh with her, but in so doing, he defiles the temple of the Holy Spirit, who dwells in believers (1 Cor. 6:16-19). He gives us a godly perspective of how to use our bodies when he concludes (1 Cor. 6:19b-20), **"You are not your own. For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body."**

Jesus warned that if you do not take radical action (pluck out your eye, cut off your hand) to rid yourself of the sin of mental lust, you are on your way to hell (Matt. 5:27-30)! I would not have said it so harshly, but Jesus did and He is Lord. So you don't want God to give you over to that sin! Get help if you need it, but judge lust before it judges you!

Next time we will study verses 26-27 that deal with one specific sexual sin as an illustration of the vile passions to which God gives people over. Why does God give people up to uncleanness for the dishonoring of their bodies? Verse 25, because they are those **"who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen."**

"The truth of God" refers to the truth that He has revealed about Himself. As we saw in 1:18-23, God reveals Himself generally in every person through His wrath against sin and through His creation. But sinful men exchanged this truth of God for **"the lie,"** which refers to the lie of idolatry: The lie that you can ignore God and still find fulfillment in this life. The lie that you can break God's laws and still be happy. The lie that you can live the "good life" without God. The truth is that living without God isn't the good life. It's quite literally hell on earth.

In 1:23, sinners exchanged the glory of God for idols. Here, they exchange the truth of God for the lie, that we can worship things other than God, all of which are mere creatures, not the Creator. The word "exchange" implies that if you cast off God, you will serve idols.

God allows this whole process of widespread, unchecked rejection of Him to lead to a sexual immorality that becomes pervasive. He lets them go that way to show how empty

and barren life is without Him. When people think they can find fulfillment in sex, God says, "Look, it won't work. But you won't believe that until you find out for yourself." So God "abandons" people to sexual immorality. He lets them indulge their fantasies. He stands back while they rush headlong off the cliff of unbridled lust to be broken on the jagged rocks of disobedience. Why? He does it because He knows that in the end they will be more unhappy than they were in the beginning. Only then will they begin to see their sin and their need for God.

Seen in that light, Romans 1 is the most hopeful passage in all the Bible. It's hopeful because as Pastor Luthi said, it tells us the whole truth about our condition. And if we can bear to hear the whole truth, then we can be healed. Romans 1 is hard truth, but behind the hard words stands the bleeding form of the Son of God reaching out to a world that crucified him.

After all, no one is more likely to welcome the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ than those who have experienced the wrath of God in the outworking of their own sinful behavior.

No one needs the grace of God like those who have experienced the judgment of God. If you need a massive dose of God's grace, then Romans 1 has done its work in your heart. If you have eaten at Satan's trough long enough, then in the name of Jesus Christ, I invite you to the banquet that will never end.