

When Man Rejects God

Romans 1:18-23

Follow along as I read Romans 1:18-23,

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.

We can sum up his message in 1:18-23: God is just in pouring out His wrath on the human race because we have sinfully rejected His revelation of Himself and have worshiped the creature rather than the Creator.

Paul argues that God has revealed Himself to the human race, both through His wrath (1:18) and through His creation (1:19-20). But we have inexcusably rejected God's revelation and instead have resorted to inventing gods of our own (1:21-23).

This study picks up precisely where our last study ended. Paul has already said that mankind has the knowledge of God made clear in the conscience and in creation. Something about God "gets through" to every person. But if that's true, how do you explain homosexuality, abortion, the worship of sex, the worship of money, and the deification of material success?

There are five fatal steps that men take when they decide to turn away from the living and true God. Each step takes him farther and farther away from the truth he once knew. Each step plunges him deeper and deeper into the pit of idolatry. Each step, whether taken consciously or (more likely) unconsciously, leads him toward personal destruction.

It begins where we left off last time.

III. Man's Rejection of God (1:21-23)

Paul begins by saying, "**because, although they knew God.**" Who is the "they" who once knew God? In this context it refers to the same people who are said to be under the wrath of God in verse 18. And who is that? The people in verses 19-20 who saw the clear revelation of God in nature. Who are we talking about? All these verses refer to the entire human race. Paul says that everyone knows something about God from the testimony of creation and the testimony of conscience.

But that's not the whole story. Not only do all men know something about God, but left to himself, every person suppresses the truth he knows! He slides down the path from the knowledge of God toward outright idolatry.

That means the problem with the human race is not a lack of knowledge. The deeper problem is ignoring the knowledge we already have. Truth always demands a response. No one can be neutral in the spiritual arena.

This leads to the next step. When people push away the truth about God it results in a:

1. People refuse to glorify God or give thanks.

This is the root sin: Although people know about God, they do not give Him His proper glory and they do not express thanks to Him for His many undeserved blessings. The truth about God demands that we the creatures glorify him as the great Creator. When we don't, we fail in the great purpose for which we were created.

We could easily develop an entire sermon or two here, but let me apply it directly: It's easy to sit here and shake our heads at the heathen, who have no concept of glorifying God or giving thanks. But do I glorify God for His goodness and mercy and grace? Do I give thanks to God for His many blessings that He showers on me every day?

When people refuse to glorify God or to be thankful to God, they have missed the very purpose for their being. The next step is downward:

2. People's thinking becomes futile.

As men become indifferent to known truth, they begin to actively search for alternative explanations. Paul draws a vivid picture of the result: they "**became futile in their thoughts.**" This is what happens when men turn away from God. Their thinking—that is, their ability to look at the world around them and to draw accurate conclusions about it—becomes futile.

We see this vividly in the story of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4. He uses his mind and might to build Babylon, then says, "Is not this great Babylon which I have built by my mighty power!" (4:30). God was so displeased with his pride and his failure to use his mind to acknowledge God that "he was driven from among men, and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws" (4:33).

Then come the key words: "At the end of the days, I Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven [that is, to God], and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High and praised and honored him who lives forever." When your eyes are Godward, your reason returns. Why? Because your mind was made for God. And when Nebuchadnezzar's reason returns, he uses it as God intended: "he blessed and praised and glorified the One who lives forever."

Once you neglect the truth you know, your thinking quickly becomes confused. At this point it is hard not to think of the modern evolutionist, who having rejected creation out of hand, searches in vain for some satisfying alternative. Even though some of their conclusion defy reasonable logic and are mathematically improbable, they cling to their speculations because they have suppressed the truth about God.

Paul gives this strange picture of men who, having rejected the truth, desperately search for anything to replace it. They flit from idea to idea, from theory to theory, frantically looking for the answer. They couldn't stop thinking and they couldn't get it right.

Those who refuse to honor God, soon leave Him in their minds! As a result man's natural capacity to reason accurately about reality is quickly and permanently harmed. This leads to the next step, The light of God's truth has gone out; men now grope in darkness:

3. People's hearts are darkened.

What starts with neglect leads to speculation which leads to moral blindness. Romans 1:21 says, **"Their foolish hearts were darkened."**

So what happens when you turn away from God? First the mind becomes confused, then the heart is darkened so that you cannot see clearly to make good moral choices. To turn from the truth is to plunge yourself into moral darkness. Moral collapse is always a result of spiritual decay. People make bad moral choices from their blinded hearts.

Paul also refers to this in Ephesians 4:18, where he describes "the Gentiles" (pagans) as **"having their understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart;"** To be in the dark refers to total moral and spiritual blindness. Only God can shine His light into such dark hearts (2 Cor. 4:4-6). At the heart of every person, darkness has settled—a darkness that only the light of the gospel can penetrate.

What happens next?

4. People profess to be wise, but are fools.

This is the way it was from the beginning and still is. Satan said to Eve in the garden, "'God knows that in the day you eat from [the forbidden tree], your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' When the woman saw that the tree . . . was desirable to make one wise [Romans 1:22!], she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her husband with her, and he ate" (Genesis 3:5-6). If you want to assume the role of God in governing your life, you will perceive this dark exchange - idolatry - as the wisest thing in the world.

But God does not see it that way. Since the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (Ps. 111:10), those who do not fear God or bow before Him as God profess to be wise, but are fools (Ps. 14:1). "Fools" does not refer to mental deficiency, but to spiritual and moral deficiency. Turning from the revelation that God has given of Himself in His wrath and in creation, sinners plunge into futile speculation and become fools. That's what God thinks of the world's intellectuals. Although possessing great intelligence, they are moral and spiritual pygmies.

The final result is:

5. People worship the creature rather than the creator.

This is the final step in man's tragic turning away from God. The digression is clear:

Neglect, Speculation, Moral Blindness, Loss of God, Idolatry.

Rejecting God does not lead to atheism, but to substituting the glory of the one true God gods of our own making. In verse 23 Paul paints a startling picture: **"and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things."** What has happened? Because man is incurably religious, if he will not worship God, he will make something else to worship.

Mankind didn't begin with pagan idolatry and polytheism and work his way up to monotheism. The Bible declares that mankind began by knowing the one true God, but when he suppresses the truth in unrighteousness, he falls into the supreme foolishness of idolatry (Isa. 44:9-20).

When man turns away from God, he creates an "image" to worship. First there are images that look human, then the images themselves begin to degrade into images of birds, four-footed animals and finally images of snakes and snails and bugs. When man turns from God, he begins by worshiping himself, but he doesn't stay there. The course is always downward.

Don't miss the point. When you turn away from God, you always turn to something else. No man lives in a vacuum. You either worship God or replace him with a god of your own making!

But how can intelligent people turn to idolatry? Easy. It happens all the time. It begins when people reject what they know about God. There are only five short steps from God to idols. People make the journey without even knowing what they're doing.

Idolatry slanders God, because it cheapens our view of who God is. It also degrades those who practice it, because you tend to become like the God you worship. Here is ultimate irony: Man who thought to surpass God by ridding himself of the Almighty now falls below the level of the bugs and reptiles.

Our real problem is that we think none of this applies to us. We don't worship idols, do we? Before you answer that question, consider that the key word of verse 22 is "image." When man turns from God, he creates "images" named after birds, animals and reptiles. Those "images" become idols. And what are idols but images that represent our view of ultimate reality? An idol is anything to which we look in order to get our sense of meaning and value in life. In that sense, many things that are good in themselves may become "idols" when we look to them for ultimate meaning and value.

Paul warns in Colossians 3:5, **"Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."**

MacArthur: Men make gods to take God's place. That's why God's angry. Don't kid yourself that man is good, that he's on the way up. He's on the way down. Evil men grow worse and worse, not better and better. The world's not getting better and men are not getting better. They're getting worse, because that's the way it goes: From revelation, to rejection, to rationalization, to religion, to reprobation.

As we wrap up this study, let's draw everything together:

Left to himself, man will always move away from God. The true judgment on the human race is that man has turned away from God and does not realize it. Those who turn away from God find it is only a short journey from the knowledge of God to the worship of idols.

I'm sure we all say, "I would never turn to idols." Don't be so sure about that. It all begins with Step # 1: Practical indifference to known truth. All you have to do is neglect the things you know to be true.

There is a way out this mess, a way provided by Jesus Christ himself. What man-made religion cannot do, what the "images" of modern day can never accomplish, Jesus Christ can do. Against the emptiness of idolatry in all its alluring forms stands the Son of God Himself. Those who turn from their empty way of life will find hope and true life in Christ.

If you don't know the Lord Jesus Christ, if you've never embraced the Son, if you've never taken God's provision for salvation, I pray that you would do that now. Say, "God, I haven't glorified You with my life. I've turned my back on You, lived in my own folly, and I stand in judgment. But I want forgiveness. I want salvation. I want eternal life. I want to know Jesus Christ." Just where you sit, that's all you have to say to Him, and His sweeping power will transform you in an instant and make you His child. And you'll be passed from death into life, from wrath to reward, from judgment to justification. I hope you'll pray that prayer.