

*Contrary to God's Design, Part 2: Romans 1:24-32*  
Ben Reaoch, Three Rivers Grace Church  
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If you've been at Three Rivers Grace for very long, you know that my usual preaching practice is to go right through books of the Bible. I recently finished a series through the Old Testament book of Joshua. Before that, we spent quite a long time going verse by verse through the great book of Romans. That's what I love to do, and I think it's healthy for us as a church to be fed from God's Word in that way.

So the sermon series we're in right now is out of the ordinary for us, but I felt compelled to do this for a number of reasons. We're looking at what God's Word says about marriage, and this has felt so weighty in light of the many unbiblical, indeed anti-biblical, messages swirling all around us. We need a rudder in the midst of this storm. We need God's voice to drown out all the other voices. We need to behold the beauty of God's design and embrace the compelling vision of what He has intended for our maleness and femaleness. God is infinitely creative, and He is entirely good. And He embedded within His creation this powerful pointer to the Gospel. Marriage is a Gospel picture. And this is a point I'm seeking to make in every one of these sermons. The marriage of a man and a woman is designed by God to display the relationship of Christ and the church. Ephesians 5 unpacks this in such a profound way, and we're going to get to that passage 3 weeks from now, Lord willing.

God's design for marriage is not merely for procreation or for a well-ordered society and healthy relationships. It is far more than that. It is a pointer to the most profound reality in all the universe, that Christ, the Bridegroom, laid down His life for His bride, the church. And that's the biggest reason I felt compelled to preach this sermon series on marriage, because the Gospel is at stake in our understanding of marriage. If marriage gets redefined in our minds, the Gospel gets redefined. So we need to make sure we're clear on what God intends for marriage. We need to see God's design for marriage as He reveals it to us so clearly in His Word.

I had the privilege of being at the WORD FM pastor appreciation luncheon this past week that they hold each fall at Heinz field. There's a very nice banquet area inside there, and it's a great event to be able to enjoy fellowship with other pastors and to be encouraged by some great music and hear from a well-known Christian leader. The speaker this year was Bob Lepine, who co-hosts the radio show Family Life with Dennis Rainey. And Bob hit on a lot of the same things I'm trying to teach in this sermon

series. And his first point was that God does not stutter when it comes to these issues of marriage and sexuality. God's Word is clear, and we're not at liberty to tamper with it.

As I mentioned last Sunday, there are many who are trying to tamper with God's Word on the question of homosexuality. And I tried last week, and will continue to do so this morning, to show the clarity with which God's Word speaks about the sin of homosexual behavior. Within this sermon series on marriage, this is where we're at last Sunday and today. The overall goal of this series is to see God's design for marriage. What we're looking at specifically right now is this particular sin which is directly contrary to God's design.

As we looked at Romans 1 last Sunday we considered the sad reality that humanity suppresses the truth and we saw some effects of suppressing the truth, like the failure to honor God, ungratefulness toward God, foolishness and idolatry. Then we looked at passages in the Old Testament that speak to the issue of homosexuality and then returned to Romans 1 to see the clear teaching about these dishonorable passions.

In the midst of all that, though, I made a point of stressing the need to speak the truth in love. We, as a church, need to be filled with grace and compassion toward every person we come in contact with, whether that's face to face or in an email or Facebook or Twitter or on a blog or wherever. We need to be people of truth and love. I pray that we will grow in that.

This is another point that Bob Lepine made at the lunch on Wednesday. He said that "HOW we speak about gender and sexuality is as important as WHAT we say." If there's no grace in our communication, how are we going to point people to the Gospel? And that's our real purpose. Bob talked about the need to communicate as broken people to broken people. As we share the truth of God's Word with those who are sexually broken, we must do so as those who recognize our own brokenness.

I closed the sermon last Sunday by saying that I desperately want these sermons to be a message of hope and compassion and healing, not a message of condemnation. So if you hear any of this as judgmental or mean or harsh, please talk to me afterwards so I can explain further and clarify anything that maybe didn't come across the way I intended.

Let's start, then, in the same text we spent most of our time in last Sunday – Romans 1.

### **The Rejection of God**

I want to start by talking about the rejection of God. And I use that phrase, "the rejection of God," in two ways. There are two rejections going on here. The rejection goes in two directions.

There is the rejection of God in the sense of sinful humanity rejecting God. And then there is also God's rejection of sinful humanity. Part of God's wrath against sinful humanity is to reject them by leaving them to their sin.

Do you see how this passage is speaking of rejection in both directions? The first part of verse 28 refers to mankind's rejection of God. They did not see fit to acknowledge God. And because of that, God rejects them and pours out His wrath by giving them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

Another way to say it would be like this: Humans reject God, and part of God's rejection of sinful humanity is allowing them to continue rejecting Him. The sins of our society are not only deserving of punishment, they are punishment. The things we might point to in our culture and say, "If things don't change, God is going to judge this nation"—those very things we point to are actually part of God's judgment upon our nation right now. And it's not just our nation, but all of humanity. We look at drug addiction and pornography and alcoholism and filthy movies and gambling and divorce and homosexuality, and we say, "These things should stop, or God's going to destroy us." And that's true. For those who persist in sin, there will be eternal damnation. But this passage is also teaching us that those sins are God's judgment upon us now. The very fact that people are continuing in these sins, and promoting these sins, is evidence of God's wrath.

**Sam Allberry**, in his book entitled *Is God Anti-Gay?* explains it very helpfully like this, "When we try to visualize what God's wrath looks like, many of us imagine scenes from a disaster movie, or think of lightning bolts falling from the sky. But Paul gives us a very different picture. We see God's wrath in this: *he gives us what we want.*"<sup>1</sup> That's scary, isn't it!

We rebel against God, and God manifests His wrath against human rebellion by allowing that rebellion to continue. We run from God, and He lets us go. That's scary. That's a horrific punishment—to be left to ourselves, to our own sinful devices, our own destructive behaviors.

Imagine a bulldog on a chain, standing several feet from the edge of a cliff. The bulldog is clawing at the ground, trying to get away from its master. Finally, in frustration and anger toward the dog's rebellion, the master lets go of the chain, and the dog foolishly leaps off the cliff to its destruction.

That's the kind of picture we're getting here in Romans 1 concerning sinful humanity. This is how we see God's wrath in this age. Sinners say, "I don't want to obey God. I want to run from God and pursue my own selfish passions." And God's severe

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<sup>1</sup> Pg. 31

punishment upon that rebellion is to say, “OK, then, I’ll let you go and pursue those wicked desires.”

We should be reminded that this passage speaks of a great many sins, not only homosexual activity. Disobeying your parents, being envious of others, gossiping about others, these also are ways in which God leaves people to their own evil desires. In these ways we should all recognize our own brokenness. These are sins that we must repent of, confess to God, and ask forgiveness. And because of Christ, there is forgiveness available to all who call on Him.

Another important clarification to make is that those who experience homosexual desires are not more broken than others. Sam Allberry makes this point, “It is important to recognize that Paul is talking in societal rather than individual terms. He is describing what happens to culture as a whole, rather than particular people. The presence of same-sex desire in some of us is not an indication that an individual has turned from God more than others, or that they have been given over by God to further sin more than others.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, if you struggle with same-sex attraction, you shouldn’t think that you have been singled out by God to experience this as though you are being punished worse than others. Homosexual desire is just one of many illustrations of the fallen condition of our world and our lives.

Allberry goes on to compare this to the experience of suffering. Some people experience much suffering, others experience less. We mustn’t conclude that those who suffer more have sinned more.

Sam says, “Similarly, the presence of homosexual feelings in me reminds me that my desires are not right because the world is not right. Together we have turned from God and together we have been given over to sin.”<sup>3</sup> So whether it’s same-sex attraction that you deal with, or a strong proclivity toward greed or gossip, we all need to admit our sin and acknowledge our need for a Savior.

Let’s jump down to verse 32, because this makes another relevant point for this discussion. Paul makes an additional comment about those who condone sin. “Though they know God’s decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them, but give approval to those who practice them.”

Here again is an example of suppressing the truth. Individuals have some knowledge of God’s existence and that they are accountable to Him. But they suppress that truth as they live out their sinful lifestyle. They plunge themselves into sin, and

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resolve never to feel badly about it. And they even make it their mission in life to convince others that these sins are OK (and even more than OK—they want the world to celebrate these sins). That’s the kind of thing Paul is talking about. The moral decay that God hands sinners over to is such a slippery slope that the world ends up looking at what is right and calling it wrong, and looking at what is wrong and calling it right.

We can’t help but think about the messages that come at us through the media about sexuality. The implied message in many TV shows and movies is that marriage is like entering a prison. Who would want to do that! What’s really exciting is to live a promiscuous lifestyle. And then there’s the gay agenda as well, wanting to celebrate something that God calls a perversion. They not only do these sins, but also give hearty approval to others who will practice these sins as well.

This is all part of our broken, sinful, fallen world.

### **The Sovereignty of God**

But that’s not the whole story. Praise be to God, that is not the whole story! And the brokenness of this world is not something that surprised God or thwarted His plan. Because He has been in control at every moment. He is sovereign, even over the sin and mess of our broken lives and our broken world.

Romans 8 talks about the fallen nature of our whole world, not only people, but everything in creation. And it also talks about the hope we have because of God’s sovereignty over this fallen world.

### **Romans 8:18-23**

Present suffering and brokenness leading to future glory. That’s what this is about, and that’s what characterizes the age in which we live. Ever since the fall in the garden, there has been suffering and brokenness. The whole universe is broken. And it would be a very sad story, indeed, if that was the final word. But that’s not the final word. Our brokenness and the brokenness of this world is not the end of the story. For Christ allowed Himself to be broken in order to bring healing and wholeness and hope. Everything is going to be set right someday. We don’t know when exactly that’s going to happen. We don’t know the day or the hour when Jesus will return and bring that about. But we do know *that* it’s going to happen. And because it is going to happen, we have hope even now in the midst of this fallen existence.

Romans 8:20 does not explicitly say who subjected the creation to futility. It’s in the passive voice (it was subjected to futility). But the reason we know this is a reference to God is because of the last two words in verse 20—“in hope.” This cannot be referring to Adam as the one who subjected the creation to

futility. Nor can it be referring to Satan as the one who subjected it to futility. Because neither of them pursued this course “in hope” of a future redemption. God is the One who had a bigger plan in this, a glorious plan.

So take comfort in that. As you feel the pain of living in this fallen world, as you deal with the brokenness of your own body and the disorder of your own emotions and desires, know for certain that God is still in control and always will be, and that He has a plan in all of this that will one day culminate in the new heavens and new earth and new redemption bodies for us. The brokenness we experience now will not always be. Those who are clinging to Christ will be ushered into a perfect, sinless paradise where we will spend eternity. No more disorder. No more dishonorable passions. No more dysfunctional relationships. No more suffering or crying or pain.

### **The Grace of God**

Finally, I want to talk about the grace of God that brings powerful and lasting change to people’s lives.

And the last passage of Scripture I want to direct our attention to is **1 Corinthians 6:9-11**, “Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:9–11, ESV)

What a great testimony that is of the powerful grace of our God. First we see in that passage the seriousness of sin and the very real punishment for unrepentant sin. Those who continue in such practices, whether it be homosexual activity or drunkenness or greed, individuals who engage in sin, plunge themselves into sinful practices and never turn from those practices to Jesus, they will die in their sin and suffer eternally for it. That is what we all deserve. But because of Jesus’ sacrifice there is hope. There is transforming power. There is grace to turn us from our sin to Jesus. And when that happens, there is a fundamental shift in our identity and practice. We are not who we once were.

Sam Allberry, reflecting on these verses, makes the point that homosexual sin is not inescapable. Some may feel that it is. There may be some here today who have same-sex desires, and you might feel like there’s no way to avoid acting on those desires. You may feel like this is part of your identity, as our culture certainly speaks in these ways. One’s sexual orientation is talked

about in terms of identity. “So-and-so is a homosexual,” people will say. But if you’re a believer, that’s not true. Your identity is in Christ. You are a new creation in Him.

Here’s what Allberry writes, “However ingrained it may be in someone’s behavior, homosexual conduct is not inescapable. It is possible for someone living a practicing gay lifestyle to be made new by God. Temptations and feelings may well linger. That Paul is warning his readers not to revert to their former way of life suggests there is still some desire to. But in Christ we are no longer who we were. Those who have come out of an active gay lifestyle need to understand how to see themselves. What defined us then no longer defines us now.”<sup>4</sup>

So for those who are struggling with homosexual feelings, you need to understand that there is hope. Certain things in this fallen world have conspired to disorder your sexual desires. But God’s grace is powerful, and change is definitely possible. That doesn’t mean it will be easy. It probably doesn’t mean that your same-sex attraction will suddenly disappear. But there will be grace to fight temptation and to grow in holiness and obedience to our Savior and to experience the joy of that obedience.

I’ve listened to stories of individuals who do go on to experience heterosexual attraction and get married. Others remain single and chaste and are able to experience the goodness of God in their single life.

I’ve listened to some powerful testimonies, like Sam Allberry, and I just think about the difficult position these individuals are put in today. The entire world, it seems, is saying, “act on your desires, whatever they may be. That’s who you are. Why fight it?” But Sam, and others, are not following the world. They are following the Word of God. And they bear witness to the goodness of God’s Word, God’s commands, God’s instructions for our lives. As I watched a video clip of Sam Allberry sharing his story, it was so clear that this is not a man who is oppressed by legalistic rules. This is a man who is liberated by the power of the Gospel.

Another very powerful testimony is that of **Rosaria Butterfield**. I know some of you are familiar with her story and her book, which is entitled *The Secret Thoughts of An Unlikely Convert: An English Professor’s Journey into Christian Faith*. She was a tenured professor at Syracuse University, living with her lesbian partner, when she was befriended by a Reformed Presbyterian pastor and his wife. And, by the way, I think that pastor and his wife provide a great example of speaking the truth in love. As Rosaria shares the story, she says that this couple invited her over for dinner and to her surprise, on that first occasion, they

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<sup>4</sup> Pg. 35

did not share the Gospel with her and they did not invite her to church. What they did was listen to her, befriend her, show hospitality to her. And that led to a deeper friendship which God then used to convert her. They were able to communicate love in a meaningful way as well as communicate the truth of the Gospel. Rosaria is now a pastor's wife, mother, writer, and very effective communicator of the transforming power of Jesus Christ.

To recap, in closing . . . What we've talked about this morning is **the Rejection of God, the Sovereignty of God, and the Grace of God**. The disorder of our lives, the dishonorable passions, the brokenness that is present in each of us, is a result of sin. And yet God is sovereign even over these things, and He has a plan to bring all things into perfect harmony and wholeness. So we look forward to that day when Jesus will return. And we have hope also for the present time, as we continue to live in this fallen world, because God's grace has changed us and is changing us. We are not what we once were.

And the last thing I'll say is . . . If you struggle with same-sex attraction, or know somebody who does, please know that there are many very helpful resources and counselors and ministries that are there to help. And we as a church are here to help. Please feel free to talk to me or others here about how we might be able to help you. We're all in this journey together, with our various hang-ups and struggles, all of us broken sinners in need of Jesus.