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# Sin's Universal Depravity

## Romans 1:18-32

*Russ Kennedy*

### Introduction

What do you think about the following quote from a popular, *evangelical*, pastor and radio teacher?

“What about those people who've never heard, who will not hear? What about them? You know what? I know two things, I know several things about God, these two I know for sure: He's absolutely perfect. Absolutely holy. Absolutely righteous. and absolutely just. And he is absolutely loving. You know what? That's a question I don't have to answer because nobody has the ultimate answer. Somebody could say, 'Well, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Correct. Would God send somebody (and this is the way it usually is said), would God send somebody to hell because they did not receive Jesus whom they never heard about, never had the privilege of knowing about? And my answer is: No, he would not.” (Charles Stanley, *In Touch* program aired on July 31,2001)

The good news or the bad news: which do you want first? Well, we are about to find that Charles Stanley is wrong and Romans 1-3 do give us the ultimate answer.

#### *Its Overarching Purpose*

The purpose of this long section is to declare how the wrath of God is revealed, to what extent, with what consequence and to dialog with objections. Our understanding of the condition of the lost, particularly, those groups of people whose condemnation is sometimes made an open question. The gospel does not propose some alternative way that certain groups of people are excused from the sentence of God's condemnation and His just wrath. The good news comes in the face of universal and unequivocal condemnation.

#### *Its Logical Progression*

Hear Paul's way of thinking about this: He has an apostolic obligation to preach the gospel that fuels his eagerness to preach. His eagerness to preach the gospel is grounded in his confidence in the gospel's power to save and its ability to reveal the righteousness of God. The gospel is universally and everywhere needed because man is universally and everywhere condemned. And all men everywhere live in the context of the universal revelation of the wrath of God.

#### *Its Repeated Pattern*

The pattern followed in each section is identical. He addresses each category of people, and individually and corporately:

Reminding of their knowledge of God and His goodness to them;  
 Confronting them with the facts that they have not lived up to that knowledge or goodness shown;  
 Pronouncing them guilty as charged and subject to the just wrath of God.

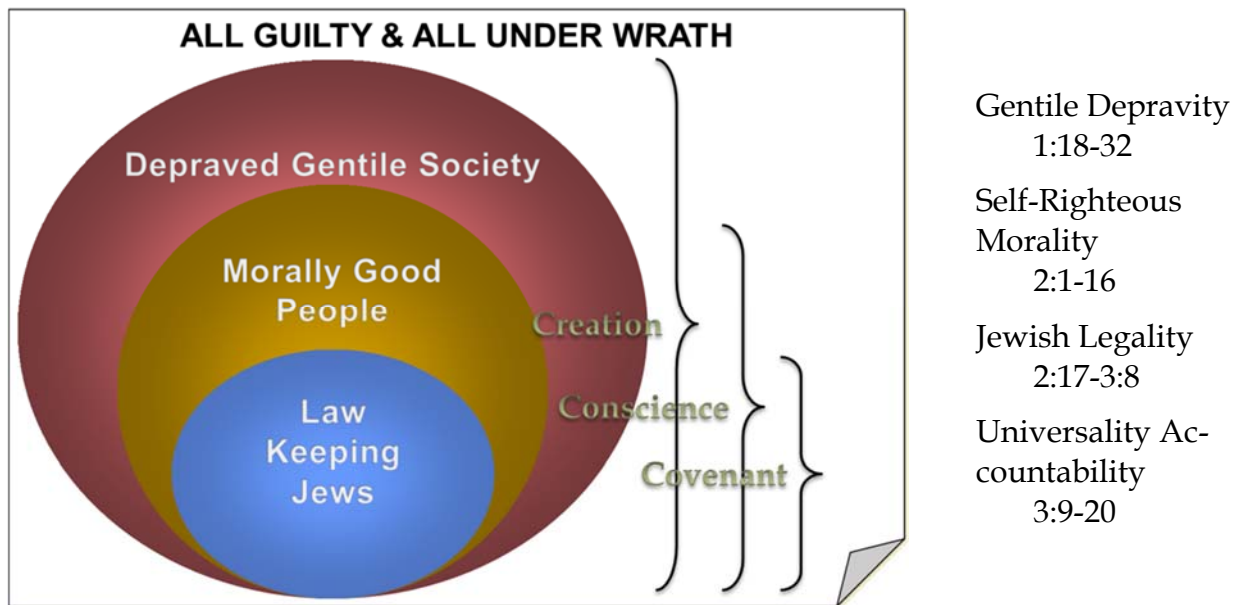
*Its Literary Structure*

The parallel structure of the text is visualized, following its literary and grammatical components.

☞ Portrayal of Universal Depravity	1:18-32
☞ <i>they</i>	
☞ Charges against the Moralists	2:1-16
☞ <i>you</i>	
☞ Charges against the Jews	2:17-3:8
☞ <i>you</i>	
☞ Pronouncement of Universal Damnation	3:9-20
☞ <i>we</i>	

*Its Clear Indictment*

This chart visualizes how Paul develops the indictment in terms of concentric circles of groups, revelation, responsibility and response.



**Figure 1 - The Indictment**

Let's now walk through this text in such a way that hearing the bad news causes us to long for and to embrace the good news.

The portrayal of universal depravity here is historical, cultural and personal. It traces the decline since creation, following the story line of the Bible in several places. It also is cultural as it explains the decline in culture after culture. And it is personal. Each of us who have lived sinful lives can see our lives in this text.

## **Their Indictment (v.18-20)**

<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. <sup>19</sup> For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. <sup>20</sup> For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

### ***A Revealed Wrath (v. 18)***

Their indictment begins in that the wrath of God has been revealed. God's wrath is against man's ungodliness and unrighteousness, against man's believing and acting as though God does not exist and without regard to God's law.

### ***An Active Resistance (v. 19)***

It is not that man is ignorant of God so that he has an excuse. Rather, man is actively resisting and rejecting what God has revealed. Since creation, God has shown Himself through what He has made. That revelation is clear and it is condemning. It is not sufficient to save, but is purposed to leave man without excuse. Creation declares the glorious greatness of God and our lowly and accountable place before Him. This is a fact all through the Bible. No one is excused. No one is exempt. Everyone lives in the environment of God's self-disclosure. Just because someone has their eyes shut doesn't mean the sun isn't shining.

### ***An Ongoing Suppression (v. 20)***

But people suppress the truth. They press it down. They push it aside. Their unrighteousness is their fingers in their ears and blinders on their eyes. The fact that people suppress the truth is part of their culpability, accountability and their guilt with the resulting condemnation.

## **Their Idolatry (v.21-25)**

How does that work? How has the clear knowledge of God at creation become suppressed over time and history? How do people suppress the truth all around them?

<sup>21</sup> For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Claiming to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and exchanged the glory of the

immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

<sup>24</sup> Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, <sup>25</sup> because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

### ***A Fundamental Truth***

The most fundamental thing about us is that we are made to worship. All human beings are serving someone or something. So, idolatry in the heart is at the heart of man's sinful condition. That idolatry involves two fundamental exchanges, or trades.

### ***A Condemning Exchange***

There is an exchange of the glory of God for an image, trading the greatness of the Creator for the greatness of the creation. This comes not out of ignorance, but intentional turning the knowledge of God into futile and heart darkening myths while calling themselves wise.

The second exchange is in trading the truth of God for a lie. Having believed lies, God delivers them over to serve their lusts since they refuse to serve God. Thus they worship and serve what is made, rather than the Creator. They mistake that which reveals God for that which is God.

### ***An Authoritative Interpretation***

Now, this is God's interpretation of history and people. Many have offered alternative explanations, some of which have become standard Christian teaching. They are wrong. They are false. History is the story of people and cultures taking what is clear in general revelation and instead of worshipping the God revealed worship a god of their own making beginning with themselves.

## **Their Immorality (v.26-27)**

<sup>26</sup> For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; <sup>27</sup> and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

### ***Enslaving Passions***

Because of their idolatry, God hands them over to being enslaved by their passions leading to degrading practices. Their prideful idolatry lands them in perverted immorality. Man is normally restrained by God's common grace so that he does not become as evil in his conduct as he is in his nature. This is for the common good. But God can and does withdraw that common grace, giving people over then to the pursuit of whatever their evil and wicked hearts can imagine.

### ***Sinful Perversions***

It is evident from this text that lesbianism (v.26) and homosexuality (v.27) are evil, degrading passions and practices. They are not natural. They are an expression of rebellion against God and rejection of His order and design. Homosexuality then is a perversion of God's design and is sin. It is a great evil that always signals the collapse of a culture and the impending wrath of God. Why? Because it shows that there is no recognition of God and no regard for God's design. That form of immoral sin is evidence of utter blindness just to the simple facts of anatomy.

### ***Transforming Truths***

But the good news that while homosexuality and lesbianism are condemned, in the church at Corinth were those redeemed and rescued from that sin.

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]

### **Their Impenitence (v.28-32)**

<sup>28</sup> And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. <sup>29</sup> They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, <sup>30</sup> slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup> foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. <sup>32</sup> Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.

This is actually the initial withdrawal of God's common grace. It follows on an unwillingness to acknowledge God as God. Here is the giving over to what is translated as "a depraved mind". Commentators have struggled with this. They tend to do so because we are not well taught that our practice of sin is the fruit of our thinking. But for those who understand that thinking is the root from which behaving grows, this makes all kinds of sense. God gives people over to a mind controlled by the sinful nature that yields in a conduct characterized by this laundry list of evil attitudes and actions.

Notice how this paragraph ends in verse 32. They know these things are wrong and have God's death sentence attached to them. Yet, they not only practice them with impunity, but give hearty encouragement to others who do as well. They move from refusing to acknowledge God to rejoicing in their evil to giving approval to others. If this does not describe our culture today, then nothing does. Most of the cultures we see today are either in this process of decline or the product of it.

Thus, Paul's portrayal describes an individual and cultural progression. This is not humanity moving upward, but sliding downward.

Humanity lives in the context of a clear, condemning but non-converting revelation since creation. However, man responded by suppression of that knowledge (v.18). He speculates about the means of that knowledge (v.21). He also responds by substituting for the great Object of that knowledge (v.25). They did so from hearts that believed lies (v.25) and followed lusts (v.26). Thus they exchange the glory of God (v.23-24), the truth of God (v.25) and the design of God (v.26-27). This resulted, at each step, God giving them over to impurity (v.24), degradation (v.26) and depraved minds (v.28).

So, everyone, everywhere at all times sins in the presence of light. Sinning against that light renders them without excuse. They are subject to the wrath of God, beginning with their life here and culminating in eternity.

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## Reflect and Respond

In the context of a clear, condemning but non-converting revelation by creation, man responded by:

- ☞ Suppression of that knowledge (v.18),
- ☞ Speculating about the means of that knowledge (v.21) and
- ☞ Substituting for the great Object of that knowledge (v.25).

They did so from hearts that:

- ☞ Believed lies (v.25) and
- ☞ Followed lusts (v.26).

Thus they exchanged:

- ☞ The glory of God (v.23-24),
- ☞ The truth of God (v.25) and
- ☞ The design of God (v.26-27).

This resulted, at each step, God giving them over to:

- ☞ Impurity (v.24),
- ☞ Degradation (v.26) and
- ☞ Depraved minds (v.28).

*So, everyone, everywhere at all times sins in the presence of light.*

THEREFORE

We must cry out for mercy...  
We must carry the gospel to the lost...