

From his discussion of man's general predicament resulting from the disobedience in Eden and his consequent subjection to divine wrath, Paul turns to the specific way in which that wrath is manifested (1:24-32). This context can be divided into three sections, each of which is introduced by the assertion, "*God gave them over...*" (ref. 1:24, 26, 28). Further, in each instance the grammar and syntax are identical, with the verb highlighted at the beginning of its clause. In this way Paul created a kind of woeful, despairing refrain that serves as the drumbeat of the context. As noted previously, this conspicuous structure indicates that Paul conceived of the present revelation of divine wrath (1:18) primarily, if not entirely, in terms of God giving men over to themselves.

Various conclusions have been reached regarding the relationship between these three contexts, a common one being that they build upon one another in a progressive manner: *impurity* (1:24) leading to *homosexuality* (1:26-27), which in turn leads to every manifestation of *unrighteousness* (1:28-32). In similar fashion, others have viewed these contexts as building in intensity as they move from one to another. Although this sort of ascending structure has the appeal of being orderly and systematic, it is not clear that it is either contextually or experientially justifiable.

The place to begin is to observe again that Paul's fundamental point in this context is that human *idolatry* constitutes the essence of depravity. Consistent with the third chapter of Genesis, he understood idolatry in terms of the "ascension of self," which is necessarily accompanied by the suppression of the truth of who God is, and that for the purpose of avoiding personal responsibility to Him. Thus man's problem is not ignorance, stupidity, or a lack of spirituality; his problem is his consuming self-love that drives him to worship and serve himself. And because no man can serve two masters, he is compelled to suppress his knowledge of God and his obligation to love, worship, and serve him. Though men know God, they refuse to honor Him as God or give Him thanks (1:21a).

Again, it cannot be overemphasized that men's refusal to love and worship God is effectively a denial of *themselves*. As image-bearer, man was created and designed for this express purpose. Therefore, when he refuses a proper relation with God his own humanity is obscured and perverted and he dies to himself; *he becomes futile in his speculations and his foolish heart is darkened* (1:21b). The result is every form of inward and outward unrighteousness, including all manner of sexual sin, *all of which is nothing more than the practical outworking of the idolatry that was initiated in the garden*. Thus, verse 1:24 expresses the consequence of the idolatry stated in 1:21-23, as also does 1:26-27 in relation to 1:25, and 1:28b to 1:28a.

It is notable that this thematic pattern of idolatry leading to unrighteousness is not unique to Paul; it is the overarching theme in the Old Testament with respect to Israel's covenant disobedience. Indeed, it is the singular legacy of the nation's relationship with God, beginning with the episode of the golden calf at the foot of Sinai when the ratifying blood was still wet on the pages of the book in which the covenant was recorded (cf. Exodus 24:3-8 and 32:1-19). From that point forward Israel's entire existence under God's covenant was defined by the presence and fruit of personal and national idolatry.

In every generation the sons of Israel were given to the worship of “other gods,” and whether their idolatry was expressed in devotion to the false gods of the nations around them or a self-serving conception of the true God, in each instance the underlying principle was the same: *they were enslaved to the god of self-will*.

- 1) Despite the great blessing he received from God, Solomon’s idolatry in the pursuit of personal glory and pleasure led to further unrighteousness and the fracturing of the kingdom (1 Kings 11:1-11).
- 2) Jeroboam departed from God in order to preserve his kingdom from loss and set the precedent for the horrendous legacy of the northern kingdom of Israel (ref. 1 Kings 12:25-33; cf. also 16:23-33, 22:51-53; 2 Kings 3:1-3, 10:28-31, 13:1-2, 10-11, 14:23-24, 15:8-9, 17-18, 23-28, 17:1-23).
- 3) So also Judah’s history was one of increasing idolatry leading to greater manifestations of ungodliness and the eventual destruction of the nation at the hands of Babylon (Jeremiah 1:1-19, 2:1-29; Ezekiel 16, 23; Amos 2:4-5).

This defining pattern becomes all the more startling when it is recalled that God’s prohibition against idolatry was foundational to His covenant with Israel. Even more, it was the core theme in God’s call to repentance issued through His prophets throughout their generations (Exodus 20:1-5, 34:1-17; cf. Deuteronomy 6:1-15 with Judges 17-19; also 1 Kings 11:1-11, 12:25-33; Isaiah 1:1-17, 2:5-11, 44:9-20; Jeremiah 3:1-13, 4:1-2, 5:1-7, 11:1-10; Ezekiel 23; Amos 5:25-27; etc.)

And so it is that Paul was simply reiterating in concentrated form what is the uniform witness of the Scripture regarding man’s condition and relation with God. Most simply, idolatry with its **exchange** leads to judgment in being **given over** (1:23-24, 25-26, 27-28). The structure of his argument in 1:24-32 is not that of *progression*, but *articulation* and *elaboration*. That is to say, the first context (1:21-24) finds Paul presenting to the Romans his fundamental thesis that man’s innate idolatry is the fountainhead of all his calamity and unrighteousness, while in the latter two contexts (1:25-27 and 1:28-32) he clarified and amplified his thesis by further developing it.

- a. In examining verses 1:24-25 it is of first importance to recognize that 1:24 represents the *summary inference* drawn from 1:21-23, and even more broadly from 1:18-23. Paul has argued that God’s wrath is being revealed in the world because of the ungodliness and unrighteousness of human suppression of the truth. The truth that is suppressed is the innate and experiential knowledge of God, and this suppression takes the form of all men living contrary to what they know to be true: though they know God, they refuse to live with Him in a manner appropriate to that knowledge. This is not to say that they deny His existence, deity, or power altogether; *they merely insist upon interacting with Him as equals*. The result of this insistence is God manifesting His wrath by giving men over to themselves; they insist upon self-determination, and God’s judgment against them is to give them over to it and its consequences:

“Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever.”

This declaration brings to a focal point Paul’s argument thus far, and provides the foundation of understanding for what follows (1:26-3:20).

- b. The first thing to observe is that Paul does not in any way attribute to God man’s condition or its bad fruit; God *gives them over*. Yet this does not mean that He is inactive; He acts upon His indignation by His judicial condemnation in delivering men over to themselves. God sovereignly grants them the “freedom” they seek but also constrains them to reap the consequences. This perspective on God’s relation to human sin is absolutely consistent with the testimony of the Scripture, for *“God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust.”*

God is neither the source nor the advocate of man’s problem. Quite the contrary, the Bible presents God as constantly calling upon men to turn from their independent, destructive ways and find forgiveness, cleansing, peace, and the wholeness of restoration in his abundant mercy. As Israel’s Father and devoted Husband, all day long He spread out His hands to a rebellious people who, despite His faithful care, sincere entreaties, and perpetual lovingkindness, insisted upon forsaking Him and dying in their unbelief and rebellion (cf. Isaiah 65:1-2; Ezekiel 16:1-34, 18:20-32, 23; Hosea 11:1-4). In this way God exonerated Himself of any responsibility for Israel’s plight; His word to His disloyal and self-seeking people was: *“And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, judge between Me and My vineyard. What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?”* (Isaiah 5:1-12). But when men staunchly refuse His lovingkindness and overtures of mercy His patience comes to an end. So it was with Israel; so it is with the world of men, as both the Lord Himself and His apostle made clear (cf. John 5:19-47, 8:12-47; Acts 13:16-50; Romans 2:1-10).

- c. Secondly, Paul observed that God gives men over *in the lusts of their own hearts*. The determinative principle of lust is already present within them; it is not a product of God’s interaction with them. Paul’s point is that He delivers them over to what already defines them as people. This being so, it is crucial to properly understand the noun *lust*. In contemporary vernacular it carries a sexual connotation, but this is not inherent to its meaning. Neither is it synonymous with immorality in a more general sense. Rather, it denotes a compelling impulse of any kind. And, given the nature of man’s fallen condition, it implicates his bondage to **self-will**: *human lust is the overriding compulsion to satisfy personal desires in all their myriad expressions. Moreover, the specific form a person’s desire takes at any given point in time is determined by what he believes will make him happy and enhance his well-being at that moment.*

For this reason desire is constantly changing in its expression and specific object, but its basis and orientation remain fixed. It has well been observed that **everything** a person does has its basis in his consuming concern for his own happiness and well-being. Even the restraint that marks personal discipline and foregone pleasure has its motive in perceived long-term benefit. The understanding that lust is the compulsion of self-will reveals that it is much more comprehensive - and therefore much more catastrophic - than simply sexual desire. It is the driving motivation of the heart that is the essential manifestation of idolatry. Because all men are utterly devoted to themselves, every movement of their minds, affections, and wills finds its impetus in perceived *personal benefit* and, conversely, the avoidance of every kind of *personal loss*.

It may not be immediately apparent, but this understanding of lust is in perfect accord with Paul and his meaning in this context. *For a careful consideration of his argument in these two verses reveals that Paul equated lust with the worship and service of the creature rather than the Creator.* This being so, it is evident that lust frequently expresses itself in a disciplined life, strict morality, and even fervent religious piety and zeal, which truth may come as a shock to many.

- d. Because lust characterizes the human condition, it is not inherently associated with immorality - sexual or otherwise. *Were this not the case, then men characterized by moral restraint would be free of lust and Paul's declaration concerning God's wrath would not apply to them;* those who have no lust cannot be given over to it as a judicial punishment from God. But though immorality cannot be equated with lust, it is a *consequence* of lust left to itself, even as Paul shows it to be a manifestation of the *impurity* unto which God gives men over.
- 1) That impurity is a necessary consequence of lust is evident from the fact that lust is the human compulsion toward self-gratification and self-enhancement. And since every person acts as his own "god," what constitutes *benefit* is purely a matter of individual conviction - *every man does what is right in his own eyes.* Yet man's idolatry finds him suppressing the truth, so that he reaches his conclusions concerning what is good and profitable through the operation of a darkened mind. Because his thinking is corrupted, his conclusions are flawed. The result is that what is regarded and pursued as beneficial is actually *impure*, regardless of how moral, excellent, or laudable it may appear. *"To the pure, all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled"* (Titus 1:15).
 - 2) Thus Paul could affirm that the result of men being give over to their own inward lusts is *impurity*. Though impurity ultimately embraces everything that is not of faith, Paul was concerned with it as it results in *physical degradation* - men dishonoring their bodies among themselves. By his grammar Paul was careful to preserve God's innocence in His judgment, for it attributes the action, its motivation, and its operation entirely to men.

On the face of it, Paul's indictment that men *dishonor* themselves with one another may perhaps seem paradoxical. For in their self-concern men are naturally given to enhancing their honor and respectability in their own sight as well as that of others (Matthew 6:1-18; John 5:39-44; etc.). But the paradox is solved when it is understood that what God regards as dishonorable is not necessarily so with men. People engage in all sorts of activities that gain them the notice, envy, and accolades of others while being abominable to God (Luke 16:15). And even when what they do is clearly immoral, men are always able to find a way to rationalize their deeds such that they do not stand condemned by them in their own minds.

It is also interesting to note how readily the *body* lends itself to men's quest for self-gratification. Although lust is an inward dynamic, man is a physical creature, with the result that his desires are predominantly associated with physical pleasure tied to the five senses with which he interacts with the world. Both here and in the broader context the issue of sexuality is clearly Paul's emphasis, *but this must not obscure the fact that the pursuit of sexual pleasure is but one small facet of the dishonoring of the body*. In reality, every physical pleasure implicates the body, so that this category of desire extends to virtually every aspect of a person's daily life. God's giving men over to themselves for the dishonoring of their bodies can manifest itself in gluttony, alcohol and drug abuse, and any number of other behaviors and obsessions associated with their physicality.

- e. For the second time Paul reiterated that this calamity is the fruit of man's *intractable idolatry* (ref. 1:21-23 in relation to 1:24). As idolatry is the exaltation of self to the place of God, it stands as the hallmark of fallen man (Genesis 3). And having usurped God's rightful place, the result is that the gratification of personal desires becomes the focal point of human existence. As those who are given to the worship and service of themselves, men devote their entire lives to the pursuit of what they believe will bring them satisfaction. While not limited to bodily pleasures, these certainly dominate their pursuits (Matthew 6:24-32).

Human depravity is marked by profound ironies, and perhaps the greatest is that men give their lives to the pursuit of things they believe to be enriching and fulfilling, and yet all of them - whatever form they take - are detrimental and contribute to their eventual destruction. The reason is that men pursue their goals in alienation from God, and therefore in alienation from the truth of who they are. Being estranged from themselves, their sense of what is good for them is perverted. No matter how hard they try and how many paths they walk down, men are consigned to increase their own misery as long as they seek to live their lives in denial of the God in whose image and for whose worship they were created.

So Paul could affirm with all candor and a heavy heart that "*the Gentiles walk in the futility of their mind, being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God, because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality, for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness.*"

It was previously observed that the central theme for the larger context of verses 1:18-32 is that the human idolatry that began in the garden provokes God's present wrath. God expresses His wrathful indignation by giving men over to themselves to pursue their personal idolatry to its fullest extent and thereby reap the consequences of it. Thus verse 1:24 provides the summary inference for the preceding passage (1:18-23) and highlights the contextual pattern of *idolatry incurring wrath*. From there Paul twice repeats this pattern (1:25 with 1:26-27 and 1:28a with 128b-32). Often this context is treated as simply presenting the fact that all men are rebellious and immoral sinners who justly incur God's condemnation. But such a simplistic understanding misses the essence of his argument and so minimizes its insight and gravity.

- As image-bearers who live in His creation, men are innately aware of God's deity and eternal power, and these attributes clearly establish in their minds the essential Creator/creature distinction.
- This distinction and their knowledge of it impose upon all men their obligation to worship and serve the One who alone is Creator and God, yet they suppress the truth in order to worship and serve *themselves*. This is the essence of all idolatry, whether or not men make other things the direct objects of their worship. For whatever form they happen to take, all such idols are interacted with from the vantage point of an overarching self-preoccupation, so that *self* is the ultimate object of their devotion.
- This principle of "self as God" that originated with Adam and Eve defines all their descendents, making idolatry fundamental to the human condition, regardless of ethnic, cultural, religious, or other distinctions.
- And because it is a willful denial of the truth of who God is and who man is, idolatry is unrighteousness and ungodliness and, for this reason, justly incurs God's wrath.
- Finally, the way in which God manifests His wrath is by giving men over to themselves. And being consummate self-idolaters, this means that men are given over to the inward lusts that ultimately determine the way they live their lives.

Paul's argumentation presses out a profound point that is easily overlooked but is vital to understand, namely that *idolatry and lust are inseparable companions*. For at its core idolatry is devoted commitment to the creature rather than the Creator (ref. 1:21-25). And since **self** is the created entity to whom every man renders his singular devotion, human idolatry necessarily expresses itself in lust. For lust is nothing more than the relentless pursuit of the satisfaction of personal desires and goals in all their myriad forms. Therefore, just as men are self-idolaters by nature, so lust is the driving principle by which every human being lives out his idolatry. *In the context of man's fallen nature, every expression of individual human existence can ultimately be traced to the compelling motivation of personal advantage, whether in the positive obtainment of perceived benefit or the avoidance of loss.*